201 PAT STEVENS ROPES AN OUTLAW GANG

Trail South from POWDER VALLEY

PETER FIELD

A BANTAM BOOK
Complete and Unabridged

HE RODE ALONE—TO DEATH!

The Lacy gang, a will-o'-the-wisp that flicked its hate and murder all through the flats of New Mexico . . . western lawlessness on the range . . . burning fear in everyone's bones.

The Lacy gang, ruthless killers that threatened an old rancher, his defenseless daughter, his unprotected land.

The Lacy gang, shrewd, slick, unseen . . . striking at night, disappearing, ever returning.

And down the trail, into this land where no man moved in freedom, unless he moved outside the law, came Pat Stevens, on the trail south from Powder Valley, where he had tamed the Colorado vastness. Down the trail, seeking violence . . . finding it.

About the Cover

One man against a desperate gang of outlaws . . . one man stalking his foe when the slightest noise might mean death . . . one man moving silently, nearer, nearer—and then the loop of rope falls about him, fastening his arms tight to his body.

That's where Bob Doares, top-notch illustrator, rode his swivel-chair into action to portray the beginning of a blazing gun-duel that could end only in death. . . .

TRAIL SOUTH FROM POWDER VALLEY

By Peter Field

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TRAIL SOUTH FROM POWDER VALLEY

CAST OF CHARACTERS

PAT STEVENS: Like an old fire-horse snorting at the first smell of smoke, he rode into trouble just for a friend.

MOSE HIGGINS: He faced a grim-faced posse to save a stranger, which maybe evened the score.

HELEN HIGGINS: This wild young thing raised her gun and shot him, again and again and again, and watched him bleed, and hoped he wouldn't die.

EZRA: The one-eyed one, huge, savage, out of the prehistoric past, was puzzled when they wouldn't let him knock the outlaws in the head, and stack them outside the door.

SAM SLOAN: With the nerve of a catamount, the cunning of an Indian, he was the shrewdest stalker in the Southwest, and he stalked the ruthless Lacy gang.

CLARENCE ADAMS: As deputy sheriff it was his duty to arrest the killer, carry him into town, lock him up, and hang him later . . . but he'd rather just shoot him in the back, now.

JEFF CAUDRY: Fast shooting his guns, even faster with his gums, he tried to talk Pat Stevens into a place of honor, dangling from a cottonwood limb.

LEADBETTER
NED LEROY } Key gunmen in the Lacy gang.

LACY: He moved at night, razor-keen as a hawk, even more cowardly, and nobody knew what he looked like.

1

THE WEEK'S ACCUMULATION of mail that Saturday afternoon in early May consisted of a catalog of ladies' dresses for Sally Stevens from a Chicago mail-order house; a brief typewritten letter addressed to Mr. Patrick Stevens from the Colorado Stockmen's Association; and a dog-eared envelope addressed in a soft smudgy pencil to: "Pat Stevens, Somewheres in Powder Valley Colorado."

"This'n took some long time gettin' here," the postmaster at Dutch Springs chuckled as he handed Pat the last letter. "Been to Pueblo an' Hopewell Junction, an' all around. Gettin' it at-all proves you're a mighty important man in Colorado, I reckon."

A grin crinkled Pat's firm mouth. "Powder Valley ain't so big," he protested, holding the envelope up to study the postmark. "When does it say it was mailed?"

"Nigh onto three weeks ago," the postmaster pointed out importantly. "From down in New Mexico. Town name of Santa Alice or somethin' like that."

The envelope had no return address. Pat turned it over and over in his hands, frowning down at it as he strolled across from the mail window in the Dutch Springs general store to the end of a counter piled high with woolen blankets. Pat Stevens was a tall, bronzed man who carried his thirty-odd years with a look of jaunty youthfulness. Settling down to the staid life of a married rancher in the almost-civilized community of Powder Valley had quieted down naturally roving eyes and sobered up a quirky mouth, but nothing could take away from him a certain air of recklessness, of blithe audacity, that had been so much a

part of his younger years before he met Sally and fathered their young son.

His lips were pursed in a tuneless whistle as he carefully tore the envelope open and shook out a folded sheet of cheap ruled paper. He didn't know who in New Mexico would be writing to him. Seemed to him he remembered a town named Santa Alicia—somewhere about the middle part of the state. A frown puckered the outer corners of his eyes as he read the penciled salutation: "Dear Pat Stevens, You Ole Hawse-thief . . ."

He glanced on down to the bottom of the sheet to the signature, and his frown deepened. The letter was signed "Mose Higgins."

His long lithe body stiffened perceptibly. Though he continued to stare down at the penciled sheet of paper, it became blurred before his eyes as his thoughts raced back, how long? Twelve—no, fifteen years, by God. At least fifteen years. A grim scene took vivid shape in his memory. There was a stretch of sand dunes, with two men riding in the blazing sun. One rider was young, reeling in the saddle from thirst and exhaustion. The other was older, with a thin, leathery face and the kindest blue eyes a man had ever seen. Beyond the two riders, dimly seen like a mirage, were other riders, hordes of them, whipping their mounts in a desperate effort to overtake the pair.

Pat Stevens closed his eyes and a wave of physical nausea swept over him. What a young fool he had been! Mose Higgins hadn't asked any questions that day. He knew only that the young puncher was in desperate need, hounded across the New Mexico desert by a grim-faced posse with orders to shoot on sight. No, Mose hadn't asked him whether he was innocent or guilty, had refused to let him waste his breath telling the story of mistaken identity that sent the posse

on his trail. To Mose he had been only a fellow human being in need of succor, and Mose had defied the law and saved his life that day—had sent him onward that night astride a stolen horse. . . .

Pat Stevens shook his head slowly and opened his eyes. Rudely penciled words leaped up at him from the page in his hands:

I been hearing 'bout you off and on, 'bout you turning honest after that scare you got from the posse, ha-ha. Hell, boy, one look at you that time and I knowed you'd never been nothing but honest. Been hearing about you tying up with two tough gun-pards and cleaning up Powder Valley and such-like, so I'm wondering if you might be looking for another clean-up job. I don't mean to be asking no favors from you, Pat. It'll be plenty worth your time if you mosey down this way right quick while I'm still alive to put you onto a plumb raw deal. But you'll have to make it quick because I've had my warnings. And I've got a little gal that's going to need a friend if her daddy kicks off. My place is eight miles north of Santa Alicia right off the road you'll be riding. Hoping this reaches you in time and that you're still gun-handy.

Mose Higgins

Pat Stevens carefully folded the penciled note and put it back in its envelope. As he strode out of the store into the southern Colorado sunlight his face had a bleak look, as though he listened to a voice no one else could hear. He unlooped the reins of a Lazy Mare gelding from the hitch rail, swung into the saddle, and headed out of town in a slow lope.

Sally Stevens was at the door of their comfortable ranch home to greet him when he arrived a couple of hours later. Ten years of marriage had ripened Sally. She was a lovelier and more desirable woman than the slim blond lass Pat had married.

The welcoming smile faded from Sally's face when Pat swung down to the ground and came up the walk. She stepped forward to meet him, asking anxiously, "Is anything wrong in town, Pat?"

He circled her shoulders with his right arm and looked down into her face, shaking his head gravely. He confessed, "I'm worried some about havin' to leave right in the middle of the spring work. But I guess you can manage all right . . . you an' the boy, huh?" he added as young Dock came trotting up from the corrals where he had been secretly experimenting with bareback bronc-riding on a yearling heifer.

Sally leaned back against her husband's arm, her blue eyes round with amazement. "Worried about having to leave?" she echoed. "Where are you going, Pat? What sort of trouble is it this time?" Her voice was thin with quick fear which she could not conceal; a throwback to those past days when Pat's departure from home meant that he was taking up the danger-trail again, when each hour of his absence was an eon of torture for the young wife left behind.

Pat smiled reassuringly when he heard that note in her voice. He ruffled her bright fluffy hair with sinewy fingers and protested, "What makes you think there's any sort of trouble? I've just got to make a ride down into New Mexico on business."

That wasn't a lie, he comforted himself. Not really. It *was* business. Bad business, from the tone of Mose Higgins' letter.

"Don't you try to fool me, Pat Stevens. I know you too well. You're like an old fire-horse snorting at the first smell of smoke. Any time there's a chance to get in a gun fight . . . "

He silenced her with a good-natured palm over her mouth. "Just like a woman," he complained. "Always ready to believe the worst. I got a letter from an old

friend today," he hurried on. "Feller name of Mose Higgins. Mose writes that he ain't hopin' to live much longer an' he wants me to sort of come down and help him settle up things before he goes. I can't refuse an old friend that favor," he ended gently. "Can I, now?"

"Why do you have to go?" Sally asked dubiously. "Doesn't he have any friends closer than Powder Valley?"

"I reckon mebby not. They do say New Mexico is a right unfriendly country. An' it ain't all just friendship neither. The way he wrote in his letter I reckon there'll be some profit in me goin' down."

"But you're needed here at the ranch, Pat," pleaded Sally. "You're not just a kid any more, who can go traipsing off anywhere any time. You have responsibilities. . . . "

Pat Stevens' face took on a wearied, pinched look. He gestured down toward young Dock who stood near by drinking in every word his parents said. He told Sally:

"There's somethin' I haven't told you yet. Mose has got a little gal he wants for me to look after if he passes on sudden-like. I couldn't refuse a man that, Sally. Think how it'd be if me an' Dock was left here alone an' me dyin' without any friends close by. I'd shore look for an old friend to come and take care of things."

"Of course, Pat," Sally cried, drawing out of the circle of his arms. "That changes everything. Maybe I'd better go with you. Is it just a little baby—or what?"

"I don't rightly know how old the gal is," Pat confessed. "Mose didn't say in his letter. But I don't see how you can go along. No trains run down there. An' we couldn't take Dock along. Nope, honey, I reckon

I better start ridin' early in the morning an' I'll be back that much quicker."

"I'll try not to worry," Sally assured him stoutly. "You go right ahead, Pat. And you bring that little girl right back with you if it turns out she's orphaned and needs a home to stay in. Everyone says two children aren't a bit more trouble than one."

She smiled brightly and Pat felt a great lump rise in his throat as he bent to kiss her. He was ashamed of the way he'd fooled her. But hell, a man couldn't tell his wife everything. Sally would just worry her head off if she knew the implication of danger contained in Mose's letter. This way was certainly best. After it was all over, Sally would understand and forgive him.

Daylight hadn't broken when Pat swung his long legs out of bed the next morning. He shivered in the darkness as he cautiously gathered up his clothes and went out of the bedroom so he wouldn't waken Sally with his dressing. There was a faint red glow in the eastern sky when he was fully dressed and ready to go. He hesitated in the middle of the long living room, glancing down doubtfully at his waist unadorned with gun-belts.

His guns were in the bedroom, hanging in dusty holsters on nails in the wall above the head of the wide bed in which Sally was still sleeping. He took a step toward the bedroom door and his spurs rattled loudly in the pre-dawn silence. He stopped, then squatted down and removed both spurred boots. Treading silently in heavy woolen socks, he reached the bedroom door and pulled it open soundlessly. The reflected glow of a kerosene lamp behind him lighted Sally's face. She lay on her side with one white hand doubled up against her chin, breathing evenly. For perhaps the thousandth time, Pat Stevens decided he

had the prettiest wife in the whole world. He stood in the doorway a moment to admire her, and to steel himself for what had to be done. She'd be fit to be tied if she woke up and found his guns missing. But that was a chance he had to take. He'd feel worse than naked riding down into New Mexico without them sagging on his hips.

Two steps took him close enough so he could reach out and get hold of the wide leather belts. He lifted them off their nails and started to back out. Sally stirred and sighed softly. Pat stood stock-still, his heart beating like a small boy caught in the jam cupboard. Then Sally started breathing easily again, and Pat's pulse slowed to normal. He backed out of the room and closed the door, buckled the heavy gun-belts about his waist, and stepped back into his boots.

In the chill light of dawn he hastily threw a saddle on the back of a trail-wise roan that snorted and humped its back threateningly when Pat stepped aboard. That gave Pat a chance to relieve some of his pent-up feelings. He swore at the animal and drove blunt rowels into its sides. The roan crow-hopped a couple of times, then lunged away in a wild gallop. Pat swung into the lower valley road without looking back. He knew dang well he'd get choked up if he wasted a look back at the ranch house where Sally and Dock were left behind.

Smoke was spiraling out of the kitchen chimney of the Bar ES ranch house when Pat Stevens rode into the yard a couple of hourse later. It was on the road he had to take south into New Mexico and he'd promised Sally last night that he'd stop there for breakfast on his way—the only reason she had been willing to let him start that morning without getting up to fix a hot breakfast for him.

Huge, one-eyed Ezra came to the door and gaped in astonishment when he saw who the early morning visitor was. Unshaven, in a ragged undershirt with duck jeans belted about his hips, Ezra looked like some savage caveman out of the prehistoric past, but he opened his big mouth and roared an effusive welcome to his old partner when Pat strode up the path.

"Dog my cats," he bellowed happily. "Ef it ain't li'l old Pat Stevens all dressed up like a Boy Scout with a pair of shootin' irons strapped aroun' his belly jest like he knowed whut they was fer."

He engulfed Pat's hand with a bone-crushing grip while his single eye gleamed happily in the early morning sunlight. From inside the kitchen came Sam Sloan's querulous voice:

"What's that yo're hootin' aboot out there, Ezra? If we got company fer breakfast I got to throw some more ditch water an' flour in the flapjacks."

Pat entered the hot kitchen with a grin. "Wouldn't of stopped here to eat if I'd knowed you lobos was still too lazy to milk a cow so's you could make some decent flapjacks," he greeted the dark-featured wiry little man. "Plumb shiftless, that's what it is."

With a dirty floursack tied about his waist, Sam beamed at him from above a glowing wood range. "Set your car-case on a chair an stop shootin' off yore mouth. How come Sally untied you from her apron strings long enough for you to drap in for some real linin' to the inside of yore belly?"

The three men had been close gun-partners for many years past, forming a trio that was hard to beat in that country where the man who shot first was the man who survived. When Pat Stevens broke up the trio by marrying Sally and settling on the Lazy Mare ranch in upper Powder Valley, the other two partners had regretfully decided it was time for them also to

take a vacation from action, and had set up bachelor quarters on the Bar ES ranch lower down in the valley. There all three had lived continuously for more than a decade; a contented and quiet life that was broken only sporadically by ventures remindful of past exploits, but they were still three to be reckoned with when they took the trail of a desperado or a gang of criminals. One-eyed Ezra, with his gargantuan strength and his ability to carry out orders; small and dark Sam Sloan, with the nerve of a catamount and the cunning of an Indian on the trail; sober, strong and resourceful Pat Stevens who had never been bested in a gun-fight or a trial of wits—the three of them together formed a combination that had performed deeds already becoming legendary throughout the length and breadth of the untamed West.

"Jest headin' down into New Mexico on a little jaunt," Pat told Ezra and Sam mendaciously as he wolfed crisp flapjacks and burned his guts with Sam's caustic coffee. "Got a letter from Mose Higgins at Santa Alicia yesterday, askin' me to drop in an' say howdy."

"So you jest buckled on yore pop-guns an' started ridin'?" snorted Sam. "Who the hell is Mose Higgins? The two-gun terror of the badlands?"

Soberly, Pat related the facts concerning his acquaintanceship with Mose Higgins. ". . . That was the time I run foul of the law in Sante Fé on account I looked too dang much like a killer that made a specialty of bustin' ol' women over the head with his gun-butt," ended his explanation. "Mose hid me out an' helped me steal a hawse for a get-away, so I figger I owe him any favor he asks."

"An' what is the favor he asks this time?" Sam queried suspiciously.

Pat shrugged with an elaborate pretense of un-

concern. "Seems like Mose figgers he's got one foot in the grave an' he's worried some aboot what'll become of his little gal does he get both feet underground. So Sally shoos me off with orders to pack the baby back to the Lazy Mare where she'll take care of her from here on out."

A heavy, disbelieving silence settled over the kitchen when Pat finished speaking. Sam winked across the table at Ezra, then glared at Pat. "Wearin' yore guns fer the baby to cut her teeth on while she's riding back with you, I reckon?" he demanded sarcastically.

"Now, how'd you guess it?" Pat looked up at him in amazement. "Mind-readin', that's what it is. You could make money with that stunt . . . goin' around to County Fairs . . . "

Ezra blinked his single eye solemnly and said, "Me, I think he's lyin', Sam."

"Course he's lyin'," Sam snorted. "He's bin a liar since he left his mammy's breast. He's got some fun figgered out down there, an' by golly if he ain't plannin' to leave us sittin' back here suckin' our thumbs while he gets hisself killed down yonder in New Mexico."

"In which case," said Pat, smiling broadly, "I'll take it kindly if you two ring-tailed side-winders will sort of look out after Sally an' Dock." He got up and stretched. "Thanks for the bellyful. It'll last me a hour or so, mebby."

He rode away from the Bar ES ranch with an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He knew that if he had let fall one word that sounded remotely like an invitation, Sam and Ezra would have dropped everything to ride south with him. But he had thought it all out last night and decided it wouldn't be fair to them to ask them to join him. After all, he had only a hazy notion to go on. He didn't even know

there would be any trouble when he reached Santa Alicia. Mose Higgins had been woefully vague in his letter. And the chances were that he would arrive much too late. Mose had mentioned the need of speed, yet the inadequately addressed letter had been weeks on the road before it finally reached him.

No. He would feel like all kinds of a damn fool if he got Sam and Ezra's hopes aroused and had them ride with him, just to have the whole thing fizzle out. And they had their ranch to take care of. It was a small spread and they had no steady hired riders.

It was much better this way, Pat told himself disconsolately as he rode on southward alone. It was *his* debt to Mose Higgins. It wouldn't be right to mix anyone else up in it.

2

A STEADY, relentless downpour was drenching the sandy hills of central New Mexico. Though it was still early in the evening, a solid layer of black clouds overhead was like a giant roof stretching from horizon to horizon, cloaking the countryside with a heavy, velvety blackness that was relieved at intervals by a jagged dagger of lightning piercing the clouds.

A single rider plodded southward through the darkness and the drenching rain. A tall, slicker-clad figure hunched forward in the saddle astride a trail-weary roan. The steady rain had reduced Pat Stevens' jaunty Stetson to a limp and shapeless piece of felt that drooped disconsolately about his strong bronzed features; and he was wet and cold and irritated with himself for being in New Mexico at all.

He was on a damn-fool mission, and he knew it better than anyone else. He was, in fact, the only

person who knew why he had upped and ridden away from Powder Valley in southern Colorado yesterday morning.

Pat jerked his thoughts back from Powder Valley and tried to figure distances as the roan slogged on through the wet sand of the winding road. He reckoned he'd traveled maybe forty miles since early morning. That would put him some place around where the Higgins spread ought to be according to Mose's letter. But how was a man to tell with the night as black as the inside of a muley cow? He hadn't seen a sign of human habitation since mid-afternoon. It was a hell of a country, Pat mused dolefully. What the devil had caused Mose to settle down here when there were places like Powder Valley where the sun always shone and the skies were blue?

The roan shied and pranced underneath Pat Stevens as lightning tore a jagged hole through the solid canopy of black clouds overhead. The searing flash of white light illuminated the countryside for a quarter-mile radius. There was a tin mailbox tilted crazily on a wooden post by the side of the road a hundred feet in front of him. A trail led off the road up into the hills westward from the mailbox. A horse and rider were silhouetted momentarily by the lightning flash a few hundred yards distant on the trail.

Then everything was blotted by blackness again. But Pat Stevens was sitting straight in the saddle, and he felt like whooping. The mailbox meant there was a ranch house up at the end of the trail the rider was following. According to Pat's reckoning it was ten miles on to Santa Alicia, the next town. And ten miles on through the rain was more than he wanted to tackle.

He touched spurs lightly to the roan's wet flanks, and the tired animal snorted and lunged forward. Pat

reined him to the side of the road and to a stop beside the mailbox. He made two attempts to get a match struck so he could see the name on the box in the faint hope that it might be "Mose Higgins."

He gave up in disgust after the second match sputtered out, and spurred briskly up the trail. No matter whether this was the road to Higgins' ranch or not, he was taking it. At least there'd be food and warmth at the end of the trail—and directions for going on to the Higgins ranch.

The trail led sharply upward out of the sandy foothills, and before Pat had ridden half a mile his horse's shod hoofs were ringing against rock underfoot instead of thudding softly in wet sand. The rain appeared to become heavier as he rode higher, and there was the rushing sound of water sluicing down steep gulches on either side of the trail.

It gave a man an eerie feeling to ride like that in absolute darkness without the slightest idea what was ahead. Pat let the roan have his head and select his own speed, for the instinct of a horse is far superior to that of his rider under such circumstances.

The lightning began to play tricks with Pat's eyes and ears all at once. Instead of crashing down out of the heavens with jagged streaks of forked white light, the lightning became horizontal lances of yellow that spat and crackled faintly in the distance.

Pat pulled the panting roan up short and rested his hands on the leather-covered horn of his saddle. Maybe he was an ignorant horn-toad that didn't know anything about New Mexico lightning, but if he remembered anything at all from his younger days that was a gun-fight going on up there not more than half a mile ahead of him.

Instinctively, his hands slid back to rest upon the butts of twin guns in dry holsters beneath his slicker.

The gunfire was slacking off in the wet darkness ahead. There were intermittent yellow flashes now, widely spaced.

A hot flame of recklessness surged through him even while he reminded himself this wasn't his fight. He was a hundred miles from home, and he'd ridden down here to help out an old friend. He couldn't afford to go messing into another man's trouble. In fact, he didn't even know there was any trouble. Might just be some fool puncher trying his guns at a little target practice.

While he meditated thus, somehow the blunt rowels of his spurs touched the heaving side of the roan beneath him. The horse leaped into a gallop, steel shoes clattering on the rocky trail. Pat settled back in the saddle and pretended it was all the roan's doing. He chuckled, thinking what Sally would say. . . .

The roan lurched to a frantic stop, settling back on his haunches and pawing the air. Pat was thrown forward violently against the horn and he swore angrily, unable to see anything in the blackness.

At the same time there was a rending crash that seemed to come directly beneath the roan's pawing forefeet. Pat reined the trembling animal back, and a blaze of lightning behind him showed a narrow wooden bridge over a deep ravine that had just been washed from its supports by raging flood waters rushing downward. He shuddered and leaned forward to pat the roan's neck, muttering aloud, "Dang fast work, hawse. Another jump an' we'd been rolling downstream with that there bridge."

The roan nickered and twisted his head to nuzzle Pat's hand.

"But this leaves us in one hell of a mess," Pat grumbled aloud. "The shootin's stopped ahead. Maybe that's a good sign, an' maybe not. Hate to come this

far an' not find out. Besides which, I'm hankerin' for a fire an' some hot grub. That stream didn't look very wide in the lightnin' . . . not more'n one good jump, I reckon. . . ."

He cautiously urged the horse forward to the brink of the raging torrent, let the roan lower his head to sniff at the tumbling water.

"Think you can make it?" Pat questioned dubiously as the horse snorted and shrank back.

As though he understood the question perfectly, the animal tossed his head and turned away. Pat rode him back fifty feet, then turned him and put him toward the stream at a slow lope.

It was a crazy thing to do in the utter blackness. He wasn't sure how wide the jump was, whether the roan could see to take off on the edge . . .

He felt the animal's muscles tighten under him, heard the surging roar of the swollen ravine beneath them—then the roan was scrambling for his footing on the other side.

Pat Stevens forgot he was a staid rancher with a wife and boy at home. He let out a gleeful yelp and spurred up the path.

There was no more shooting now, but off to the left he discerned a faint glow of light behind a drawn shade outlining the window of a house. Beyond the lighted window was the blur of low ranch outbuildings.

He rode forward slowly, shifting his position in the saddle and groping backward underneath his slicker in order to get hold of the butt of his right-hand gun.

Somehow, that single, silent, lighted window presented an ominous aspect after all the shooting that had been going on up here a short time previously. Pat felt the short hairs at the back of his neck stand straight up as he reined cautiously into the hard-

packed dirt of the ranch yard. Was everybody dead inside the ranch house; or were unseen eyes watching him behind that window over the sights of a rifle —waiting for him to ride closer?

He shrugged off his unease and grinned at himself. Getting scary as an old maid, by God. That's what came of letting dust accumulate on his guns. If somebody said "boo" he reckoned he'd hi-tail it out of there like a skittish yearling.

He pulled up ten feet from the window and hallooed, "Hi inside! Anybody to home?"

There was no answer from the house. No discernible movement beyond the shaded window. The heavy rain was slacking to a drizzle and the flashes of lightning showed that the storm was moving on south into the flat desert country.

A horse neighed from the corrals at Pat's right. His roan lifted his head and nickered eagerly in reply. Again, Pat shouted, "Hello there. Evr'body dead hereabouts?"

His voice was echoed back to him from the silent building.

With an impatient exclamation, Pat Stevens swung out of the saddle onto the soggy ground. He dropped the reins from the roan's neck and strode forward, dragging his gun out into the open from under his slicker.

He had taken four strides toward the house when a door was jerked open suddenly, showing a rectangle of yellow light.

The slim figure of a girl was outlined in the doorway with a hand up to shade her eyes, peering out into the night.

Pat Stevens stopped in his tracks. He couldn't make out the girl's face, but the outline of her body told him she was very young. There was lithe grace in her

stance, a suggestion of wildness, like that of a young animal brought to bay—defiant and proud, yet fearful.

He made a movement to holster his gun, and lamplight from behind the girl glittered on blued steel.

Her left hand swept up from beside her body where she had been holding a gun concealed by a fold of her dress. Pat opened his mouth to shout at her, but a blast of flame spoke before he could utter a word.

He felt a numbing shock in his right arm, and staggered sideways, going to his knees. Faintly, he heard the girl in the doorway laughing. A shriek of hysterical laughter that rang out loudly in the night silence.

She fired the heavy weapon again and then again, and Pat Stevens slid slowly forward with his face downward in the mud while consciouness ebbed out of him.

3

When consciousness slowly throbbed back into Pat Stevens' lax body, his first hazy thought was that it had stopped raining. He still lay face down just as he had fallen, and his right arm was painfully crumpled beneath him.

He lay without moving for a long time, groping back with his thoughts, gradually picking up a disjointed memory of what had happened.

The girl had shot him. He remembered that clearly enough. Her first bullet had smashed into his right arm. He had a vague recollection of one or two more shots following the first one.

He tried flexing the fingers of his right hand, crushed under the weight of his body. They were numb and felt stuck together, but they responded to his will. That was when he discovered he was lying

on a wood floor instead of in the mud where he had fallen. His knuckles were bruised by the floor as he opened and closed his fingers.

He blinked one eye open and it caught a glow of yellow light from a kerosene lamp. He saw a pair of feminine shoes sitting squarely on the floor in his line of vision and not more than ten feet distant. They were dainty black pumps, but right now they were heavily encrusted with mud.

Slender, unstockinged ankles rose out of the black shoes. Above the ankles was the swell of smooth young calves, and his view was modestly cut off above that point by the hem of a gingham skirt.

Pat could see no more without moving his head. He closed his eyes to rest a moment before making that effort. The upper portion of his body was a solid mass of pain. In his weakened and semi-conscious condition, it seemed to Pat that he could feel his blood and his life slowly ebbing out of his open wounds.

He wondered what kind of a girl it was who would deliberately shoot a stranger without warning, drag his unconscious body inside out of the rain, then calmly seat herself in a chair and watch him bleed to death.

All sorts of fantastic images formed in his mind as he lay there with closed eyes. She must be some sort of a female ogre. A soulless and heartless creature without a spark of human mercy in her well-formed body. He recalled that single glimpse he'd had of her before she fired—the suggestion of wild freedom at bay.

He set his teeth together hard and shifted his head so he could see all the way up to the girl's face. She met his eyes with an intent, fixed gaze. She sat in a straight-backed wooden chair, bent slightly forward with elbows resting on her knees. A pointed chin was nestled in the palms of tanned hands. Thin, bloodless

lips were twisted in an expression of angry scorn. A large caliber, long-barreled revolver lay carelessly across her thighs.

She made no movement, did not shift her gaze as Pat Stevens stared up at her from the floor. She was about eighteen, he guessed, with a hard look of self-sufficient maturity about her features in sharp contrast to the apparent youthfulness of her figure.

Pat closed his eyes wearily after staring at her for a full thirty seconds. It was a hell of a situation. He couldn't think of anything to say to the girl. She was gloating over him, by God. That was it. She was sitting there watching him bleed to death and enjoying the spectacle with complete composure.

What could a man say to a girl like that? It would be funny if he wasn't dying. A wave of sickness overcame Pat as he closed his eyes to shut out the girl's intent gaze. He felt himself drifting downward into a bottomless pit of soft blackness. It was a comforting feeling. He welcomed the return to unconsciousness. It was better than trying to figure things out.

The sound of a galloping horse nearing the ranch pulled him back sharply. He furtively eased one eyelid open to watch the girl. She sprang to her feet, her face going white. One thin hand clutched the butt of of her big gun while the other went to her breast. Pat moved his head so his gaze could follow her to the door. She walked with a free, swinging stride that was, oddly, graceful.

She opened the door a cautious crack as the hoofbeats stopped outside. Her gun clattered to the floor, and Pat heard a glad cry spring from her lips: "Clarence? It's *you*, Clarence!"

Spurs jingled outside. A gruff voice said, "Sure, it's me, Helen. Who'd you think it'd be?"

The girl swayed forward in the doorway. A man's

arms enveloped her tightly. Pat watched the scene without moving. The man patted the girl's shoulder and stepped up on the threshold. He was a broad-shouldered young man with a black mustache that drooped above a hard mouth. He had broad features that took on an expression of amazement when he saw Pat lying on the floor in a pool of blood. His big-fingered hand tightened on the girl's shoulder and he demanded:

"What's going on here, Helen? Who's this hombre?"

"He's one of the gang that's been after dad, Clarence." Helen leaned against his bulky body, sobbing quietly. "I—I shot him. Something terrible's happened to dad. He's . . . "

"Not dead?" ejaculated the young man sharply.

"I don't know. I'm afraid . . . " Helen checked herself, shaking her head with its smoothly coiled black hair. "He's gone, Clarence. It all started about an hour ago. Someone called dad to the door. It was raining terribly. The shooting started as soon as dad opened the door. He ran out into the night, and . . . hasn't come back. Then this man came riding up and tried to pull a gun on me. But I . . . shot first." Helen paused to glance at Pat, shuddering. "I . . . dragged him inside," she faltered. "Then I got to thinking about poor dad and all the trouble he's had, and I left him lying there on the floor. I . . . think he's dying," she ended in a tragic whisper. "He opened his eyes and looked at me a minute ago, then passed out again before he could say anything."

Clarence strode forward, saying angrily, "Good enough for him. You should have left him out there in the mud where he belonged. You can see he's a stranger. An imported gunman, I reckon."

Pat cautiously closed his eyes as the young man knelt beside him. He used all his will-power to keep

his face calm and his body lax to simulate unconsciousness as Clarence rudely rolled him over and inspected the wounds beneath his clothing.

He heard the girl move forward quickly and kneel beside him, felt her quick breath on his cheek as she cried out wretchedly, "Is he . . . dead, Clarence?"

"Not yet, I reckon. Too bad you didn't put that bullet an inch closer to his heart. Save the law a lot of trouble if you had."

"Thank God," she breathed softly. "Even if he is a killer, Clarence, I wouldn't want his blood on my hands."

The young man squatted back on his spurred heels and grunted sarcastically. "That's being plumb downright silly. He'll hang anyhow. What's it matter who finishes him off? Damned if I haven't got half a mind to . . . "

"No, Clarence. You mustn't! Don't touch your gun. Not with him lying there helpless like that."

"Women," stated Clarence heavily, "are sure funny critters. He did your daddy in, didn't he? Either killed Mose, or wounded him, maybe, and dragged him out there and turned him over to the rest of the gang to keep out of the way while he came back here after you, meaning to do only God knows what with you . . . thinking you were alone and defenseless. Still, you don't want him killed."

Still pretending unconsciousness, Pat's pulse throbbed when he heard Clarence name the girl's father. "Mose!" Mose Higgins, of course. The old friend whom he had ridden from Powder Valley to help. So, this *was* Mose's ranch. And this straight-shooting young girl was Mose's daughter—the "little gal" Mose mentioned in his letter. Pat had to repress sternly an impulse to lift up his voice and announce who he really was. They might not believe the truth. He was

learning things as he lay there seemingly unconscious. He listened while Helen Higgins spoke again. She spoke slowly, as though arguing the matter out with herself:

"It wouldn't have mattered there at first . . . when it was either him or me. I *tried* to kill him. I knew I had to shoot before he did. But, it's different now. He isn't dangerous any more. He's utterly defenseless. You can't . . . kill a man in cold blood." A note of horror crept into her voice and a little shudder ran through her.

"I could," Clarence told her coldly. "I could do it as easy as finishing off a rattlesnake."

"You're a deputy sheriff, Clarence. You're sworn to *uphold* the law. What you're suggesting would be . . . *murder.*"

"Sure I'm a deputy sheriff. So I've got to arrest this killer's carcass and carry him into town. Then we'll lock him up and nurse him back to good health . . . all so's we can loop a rope around his neck and hang him later. Does that make sense to you? It sure doesn't to me."

Pat Stevens winced inwardly at the young deputy's rough but inescapable logic. He didn't blame Clarence much for feeling as he did. Pat, himself, had often been guilty of such thoughts in the past. He had seen plenty of times in the past when it looked foolish as all get-out to bother to save a man from death just to let the law take its course in the end. Yet, a man simply couldn't allow himself to give way to such thoughts. It wasn't healthy. At least, it certainly wasn't going to be healthy for Pat Stevens if Helen Higgins allowed herself to be persuaded by Clarence.

Relief flooded through him when he heard the girl get to her feet and say coldly, "I don't like to hear you talking that way. No matter *what's* happened to

dad, we haven't any right to let this man die on our hands. You open up his clothing while I get some hot salt water."

She moved away rapidly, going to the kitchen, Pat presumed. He lay rigid, waiting to see what Clarence would do. The young man did nothing for several minutes. Then he cursed angrily deep in his throat, rocked forward on his knees and began roughly tearing Pat's blood-soaked jacket and shirt away from his torso.

Pat groaned feebly, and then louder, as though the pain was bringing him back to consciousness. He made his eyelids flutter, then jerked them wide open, staring up into the grim face of the young man. He discovered that he had conceived a violent dislike for Clarence in the interim. He had thought him a rather personable young fellow when he first covertly watched him enter and embrace Helen. Now, however, he discerned a ruthlessness about the features that had escaped him at first.

Clarence scowled blackly down at him and snorted, "Decided to come back to life, huh? What happened to Mr. Higgins?"

Pat feigned complete ignorance of all that had happened. He muttered, "Where am I? What happened?"

"You got what was coming to you . . . only not quite," Clarence told him viciously. "Where's the rest of your gang?"

"I don't know what yo're talkin' about. Me, I'm just a wanderin' waddy lookin' for a dry place to lay my body. I ride up here an' bingo! a girl starts throwin' lead at me an' that's all I know."

"Is he awake, Clarence?" Helen called eagerly, hurrying in from the kitchen with a steaming pan of water. "What does he say about dad?"

"Nothing but a pack of lies," Clarence grunted in a

sour tone. "He's fixed himself up a story about not knowing nothing. Claims he was just riding by innocent-like and stopped to find a place to get out of the wet. That's what comes of petting a killer," he went on angrily. "He'll try to wriggle out of the law's noose, sure as shooting. Country would be better off if you'd just let him lay out there and finish dying."

Helen set the pan of water on the floor and knelt beside it. Her great black eyes were fixed on Pat's face in consternation. She cried, "Maybe he's telling the truth, Clarence. When I saw him I just naturally supposed . . ."

"And you supposed right," the deputy sheriff growled. "He pulled a gun on you, didn't he? He's packing two guns, ain't he? What does a plain cowpuncher want with two guns? And you heard him shooting it out with your dad, didn't you?"

"*Someone* shot it out with dad," she corrected him softly. She dipped a cloth in the hot salt solution and began bathing Pat's wounds. Her first bullet had drilled cleanly through the muscles of his right arm, but a second had smashed through his ribs three inches below the shoulder, making a nasty mess of that side of his chest.

"Who could it have been but him?" Clarence got to his feet and strode angrily up and down the room, fuming, "After all the trouble your dad's had lately! By God, Helen, you're an unnatural daughter. Your father's missing, killed, most like. Out there in the dark and wet. And you squatting in here playing nursemaid to a two-gunned killer."

"We'll let the law decide that," she told him calmly. "That is, if he lives to come to trial. This wound in his chest looks bad to me. Hand me that dry cloth so I can bind it tightly. The bullet *did* come out, and that's one good thing."

Clarence angrily handed her the required cloth, then resumed his pacing. "Well, maybe he won't reach jail alive," he hazarded darkly. "Fellow like him's liable to make a break for it, knowing he's headed for a noose anyway. If I have to shoot him while he's trying to escape, I reckon I can't be blamed for that."

Helen Higgins finished binding Pat's wounds tightly. She rocked back on her heels, anger and scorn flashing in her black eyes. "I don't think much of a man who uses his law-badge as an excuse for killing."

Clarence stopped to stare at her. "Meaning me?"

"I could mean you, couldn't I? Isn't that what you're half-way planning to do with this man?"

"Didn't say I planned it that way. I just said if he *should* try to make a get-away . . ."

"Which prisoners have a strange way of doing when they're in your custody, don't they?" Helen was eyeing the young man queerly, half-nodding her head as though confirming a long-held suspicion.

He blustered, "I don't know what you're talking about. If you're through coddling that there killer, I'll load him on his horse and get started."

"You must know what I'm talking about. I'm remembering that you captured two members of the Lacy gang in the last two months . . . and killed both of them trying to escape while you were taking them in to jail." Helen got to her feet slowly. "Well, this man is my prisoner. Sort of. I feel responsible for him, and I think I'll ride in with you just to see that nothing happens."

"You don't know what you're saying," Clarence protested. He stepped toward Helen, extending his arms. "You're upset with all this shooting. You can't ride out tonight. Maybe Mose will be coming back . . ."

Helen eluded his embrace, slipped away from him to catch up her slicker hanging near the door. "You

go out and saddle a horse for me," she ordered with quiet finality. "I'm riding with you to Santa Alicia. If dad's able to get back here, he'll be able to take care of himself."

For a moment, Clarence hesitated. A slow flush of anger suffused his face. Then he turned and flung himself out the door with a muttered oath of exasperation.

4

THE GIRL STARTED to slip into her slicker, then stopped, glancing down at the gingham dress she wore. She hesitated, hung the slicker back on its hook and went across the room toward an inner door. She passed through it and closed the door behind her.

Pat Stevens cautiously tested his strength and his reflexes by sitting up. The upper and lower portions of his body felt unconnected, though his mind retained control over each portion. He discovered that both his holsters were empty, and he awkwardly set to work to button up his shirt and leather jacket over the bandage Helen Higgins had placed on his wounds. He didn't try to do any thinking for the moment. There would be plenty of time for that later— when he was safely in jail. He was damn glad Helen had insisted on riding in with them. He hadn't liked the deputy's tone when Clarence suggested that he would probably try to escape. The young man was entirely too free and easy with his ideas for saving the county the expense of a trial.

He had walked right into the middle of a batch of trouble, all right. This was what Mose Higgins had hinted at in his letter. Pat wished Mose had been more specific. He wondered what had happened to Mose

tonight. Seemed sort of funny that neither of the young folks had even suggested conducting a thorough search outside to see if the old man was lying out there wounded. That was only one of the funny things about the whole set-up.

Helen re-entered the room as Pat finished buttoning his jacket. She had changed to Levis and riding boots, with a short, snug-fitting sheepskin jacket buttoned tightly over the girlish swell of her bosom. A floppy Stetson topped off the outfit, hiding her coiled black hair and making her look every inch a boy.

Pat grinned at her and said, "Thanks, ma'am, for taking this trouble to see I reach jail alive."

She replied coldly, "Don't mention it," and went past him to take down her slicker.

"I didn't shoot your daddy," Pat told her. "I don't know nothin' about nothin'. I *did* see some shootin' while I was riding up the lane from the main road."

Helen whirled about with one arm in the sleeve of her slicker. "Did anyone pass you coming out of the lane?"

Pat shook his head. "Nary a soul."

The look of bright expectancy faded from her young face. She said tonelessly, "Now I know you're lying. That lane's the only way up to the ranch. You're the only one who could have done the shooting."

"Other fellow might've hung back till I got here, then took out."

"Why should I listen to you?" Helen cried angrily. "Clarence is right. You're just another one of Lacy's gang. A two-gun killer."

Pat Stevens slitted his eyes. He drawled, "For a girl that thinks so much of her daddy . . . looks to me like you wouldn't be ridin' off without lookin' for him good outside. S'pose he was laying out there dyin'?"

"Is he?" she flashed at him.

"I don't rightly know. But if I was you I'd take time for a look around before I went ridin' off to town."

She hesitated, then shook her head. "You're just trying to trick me . . . delay things until some others of your gang get here to rescue you."

"'Twouldn't hurt none to look," Pat insisted. "Might be Mose is layin' out there . . ."

"And you're just a wandering waddy that happened to drop in?" she cried scornfully. "How do you know my father's name is Mose?"

"Well . . . I . . . I heard you an' that deputy callin' him that."

"That's a likely story. Anyway, I know he isn't out around here close . . . unless he's hurt so badly he can't answer me. I went out and called after the shooting ended. That's where I was as I guess you know when you started hollering. I was around back looking."

Pat shrugged his shoulders. "All right, Ma'am. I was just meanin' to help."

"You've helped enough. You and all your gang. You've got dad in such a state I never know what he's going to do." The girl's fine black eyes filled with tears. She turned her face away and sobbed quietly.

Clarence pushed the door open and stuck his head inside. "Ready?"

Helen nodded, wiped the back of her hand over her eyes. She turned to look at Pat, asking Clarence doubtfully, "Do you think he can walk out to his horse?"

"I sure ain't going to carry him," Clarence responded sourly. He entered and stood over Pat. "Stand up on your hind legs and get out to your horse."

A wave of anger swept over Pat. Under the impetus of it, he rocked forward to rest his fingertips against the floor, lifted himself painfully. He staggered and would have fallen had not Helen stepped forward and

caught his left arm. Clarence stood aside, glowering at them, as Pat hobbled forward.

The deputy followed into the yard and roughly assisted Pat into the roan's saddle. He took a coiled rope from the saddlehorn and looped it about the horse's belly, securely binding Pat's feet down so he couldn't possibly either fall or jump from the saddle. He then looped his own rope over the roan's neck, removed the bridle and fastened the other end of the lead rope to his saddle horn. Helen had mounted her horse in the meantime, and the little procession started down the lane away from the Higgins ranch with Pat's roan docilely following the other two.

They went along at a trot until the lead horses stopped suddenly on the brink of the ravine where the wooden bridge was washed out. Pat's led horse trotted up beside them and he heard Clarence declaring:

". . . been telling Mose another rain would wash that dang bridge right out. How are we going to get across it?"

"The bank is shallow just below the bridge." Helen reined her horse down the slope and Clarence followed. The ravine widened abruptly, and the steep sides gave way to flat banks. The swollen stream had gone down since Pat had jumped his horse across. It was only fetlock-deep as they splashed across.

His roan had an easy trail-trot that didn't shake his rider unduly, but every step the horse took was sheer agony for Pat. It felt as though a couple of his ribs were broken with the jagged ends grinding against each other, and he could feel Helen's bandage slipping underneath his shirt, could feel a fresh outflow of hot blood seeping down onto his thighs.

He kept his teeth set tightly and endured the agony. Mose had written that his ranch was only eight miles out from Santa Alicia. Pat figured a man could stand

anything for eight miles. He wasn't worried about what would happen when he reached town and jail. He could prove to the sheriff who he was easily enough. The name of Pat Stevens was not unknown even down here in New Mexico. The reckless exploits of himself and his two gun-partners from Powder Valley had become almost legend in the West and he had papers in his pocket that would identify him quickly enough.

For the life of him, Pat couldn't have said why he hadn't told Helen and Clarence his real name and his mission in New Mexico. Some instinct had warned him to keep his mouth shut and see what he could find out first. There was something damn funny going on around the Higgins ranch. From the first moment after opening his eyes on the floor of the ranch, Pat had a hunch that everything wasn't as it seemed. He couldn't quite figure Helen out, for one thing. That lone mounted figure he'd seen riding up the lane in front of him—the shooting at the ranch—

Maybe it was all as he had heard Helen explain it to Clarence—but maybe it wasn't. Long ago, Pat Stevens had learned to obey his hunches, no matter how fantastic they seemed. That was one of the reasons he had stayed alive so long while leading a hazardous existence. Time and again in the past, his hunches had saved him from stepping into a trap—and he had that feeling right now—that he was on the edge of some unseen trap that would catch him tightly if he didn't watch his step.

There were rifts in the clouds overhead and stars were beginning to shine through. The rain had stopped completely but the drenched terrain still gave off a warm, humid smell that was like the finest perfume in the nostrils of a cattleman. You could almost smell the green grass beginning to sprout on the desert

floor and you knew there were going to be prime fat steers in the fall round-up as the result of that soaking rain.

Pat Stevens got to thinking regretfully that Powder Valley could sure use a rain like that one. The grassy slopes had been pretty dry when he rode away. Nothing like the parched lifelessness of this desert sand country, of course, but mightly dry for southeastern Colorado. He wondered what Sally and Dock were doing tonight—whether Sally had noted the absence of his guns. Sally was a mighty fine woman, but she never would get it through her pretty head that there were certain things a man couldn't turn his back on. Old friendships, for instance. An appeal for help from an old comrade who had ridden through danger with a man in the past. Oh, Sally knew how he felt about things like that, of course. She just refused to admit they were important.

His thoughts were rudely jerked back from their reverie by a sharp exclamation from ahead. He lifted his head, conscious that the two lead horses had come to an abrupt halt. In the illusive sheen of faint starglow he saw half a dozen mounted men grouped in the road ahead of them. Clarence had reined up and was demanding harshly:

"Who are you fellows and what do you mean blocking the road this way?"

Rough laughter answered him from the group of riders. A surly voice said, "None of yore bizniss, mister, who *we* are. State *yore* names an' bizniss."

"That can't be any concern of yours," blustered Clarence. "Move aside up there so we can ride through."

"Not so fast," the surly voice replied. A shadowy figure detached itself from the group and rode forward close to Helen and Clarence, leaning forward

to peer at them. "Happens we're lookin' fer a certain feller to be ridin' this way . . ." He stopped with a sudden exclamation: "Three of you, huh? Didn't see but two at fust."

"This man's my prisoner," Clarence said loudly. "We're taking him in to jail where he'll hang when he's tried for killing Mose Higgins tonight."

The rider said, "Do tell?" He looked back at the others. "You boys hear that?"

There was a muttered growl of assent, sinister, somehow, in its scarcely veiled implications. The other riders began to crowd forward, roughly jostling Helen and Clarence.

"Stay back there," Clarence ordered angrily. "I'm the law hereabouts, damn it. I'll arrest every mother's son of you if you interfere with me."

"Hear that, fellers?" the first rider mocked. "He'll 'rest us, by Gawd." He laughed hoarsely, reined past Clarence to the side of Pat's roan, tipping a heavy Stetson back to look into Pat's face.

Pat saw a scarred, cruel countenance in the faint starlight. A wide mouth twitched a knowing grin at him. "So, *yo're* him," came in a cryptic murmur from the thick lips. "You don't look so tough right now, by Gawd. Sorta like a stray lamb bein' led to the butcher shop."

Before Pat could figure out what sort of reply to make, he heard Helen Higgins saying sharply, "I don't know what you men want, but this man back here killed my father tonight." Her young voice shook with anger. "If you're any sort of *men* you won't interfere with putting him in jail where he belongs."

"A gal," one of the night riders said in a wondering voice. "This here feller's a gal." A murmur of approval, of anticipation, drifted up from the others.

"See here," put in Clarence desperately. "Let me talk to one of you alone for a minute. I think I can make you . . ."

"Should I put a bullet into this law-man, Harry?" one of the riders demanded of the man who had spoken to Pat.

"No use doin' that. Not yet," Harry ordered sharply. "We ain't shore jest what the set-up is hereaboots. Take his gun off him an' quirt his hawse down the road toward town. We better take the gal along with us. She might come in handy . . . if she kin cook."

A loud guffaw greeted his words. "Or, if she *cain't* cook," one of his followers suggested slyly.

In the meantime, Clarence was being roughly handled by two of the armed men. Despite his loud and angry protests, he was relieved of his hardware and the lead-rope to Pat's roan was untied from his saddlehorn. Then his horse was sent scampering down the road out of sight while Helen was held back on her horse.

"Kin you make out to ride a ways?" Harry asked Pat anxiously. "Want we should make a hackamore outta the rope so's you kin han'le yore hawse?"

Pat Stevens felt himself reeling in the saddle from a wave of faintness. Through set lips, he muttered, "Lucky I'm tied in the saddle so I can't fall out. But I reckon . . . you better keep right on leadin' . . . my hawse. . . ."

The stars were circling about in queer convolutions overhead. Nothing made sense any more. He was only dimly conscious of being led up alongside Helen's mount, of men taking the lead and others falling in behind, of turning sharply off the main road and galloping upward into the low foothills leading off from the New Mexico desert.

5

PAT STEVENS had no idea how far they rode upward into the foothills. Only half conscious, he was too busy trying to figure out what had happened to spend any mental effort on the physical realities of the moment.

It was clear that this band of night-riders had expected to meet him out on the road—had, at least, expected to meet *someone* for whom they had mistaken him. The only way they could have mistaken him for someone else, he reasoned, was by the fact that they accepted Clarence's statement that Pat was guilty of doing away with Mose Higgins. In other words, they had been waiting there, evidently by prearrangement, expecting to contact Higgins' attacker.

That much of it made sense, but that was the only part of the whole nightmarish situation that did make sense. Harry had intimated that they didn't know too much about the set-up hereabouts. This seemed to indicate that they were lately arrived members of a gang who mistook him for their local representative. Some God damn thing like that, Pat thought to himself wearily. He wouldn't be able to fool them very long unless he got hold of some inside information to be able to pretend that he knew what was going on.

The cryptic information contained in Higgins' letter wasn't worth a damn. Mose had merely hinted at some sort of desperate situation confronting him, had vaguely mentioned receiving some sort of "warnings." And the conversation he had overheard between the girl and Clarence didn't clarify things much either. The hell of it was, he couldn't ask questions of anybody without revealing the truth about himself. Both Helen and the gang members accepted him as being one of them.

Pat realized he wasn't thinking very clearly as he

was jolted along through the night toward some unknown destination. He had played the damn fool back at the Higgins ranch by not declaring his identity and explaining his presence immediately. But it had looked like a good idea at the time. Now it was a cinch Helen wouldn't believe him if he did get a chance to talk to her alone.

And Helen's presence was the worst part of the whole thing. He felt that he had gotten her into that. She had taken his part with Clarence, had ridden to town for the sake of insuring his safe delivery to jail.

Pat's thoughts wandered off again irrationally. There was something damn funny about that deputy sheriff, about the way the gang of men had dismissed him so casually. They didn't seem to be a bit worried about the law following them. Most outlaws would have put a bullet in a deputy sheriff who happened to be around when they decided to rescue a killer and kidnap a young girl.

Maybe they weren't outlaws at all. Maybe nothing was what it seemed to be. Maybe he was crazy and never had left Powder Valley at all.

They had topped over a long ridge and descended a steep slope into the bottom of a narrow ravine. The riders ahead seemed to know exactly where they were going. They turned up the ravine between forbidding walls of rock. The moon had come out from behind the clouds, but the bottom of the deep ravine remained cloaked in darkness.

A will-o'-the-wisp light flickered ahead over the shoulders of riders in the lead. It appeared to dance on and off as they followed the winding course of the stream-bed upward, and Pat couldn't figure out whether it was an actual light or a product of his fevered imagination.

For a long time it appeared to be moving ahead of

them steadily at about the same gait they were riding, then all at once it was right in front of them, burning brightly, a lantern hanging outside the door of a low log house built solidly up against the wall of the overhanging cliff.

Pat swayed in the saddle and clutched the horn tightly with both hands when they stopped. Riders dismounted and came back to cut the ropes holding him in the saddle. He swayed sideways into their arms, was carried inside to a large, dimly lighted room with rough solicitude.

He saw Helen Higgins standing in the center of the room as he was laid on the floor inside. Her face was dead-white, but she appeared completely composed. Harry had hold of her arm and he was saying with a leer, "Don't you worry none now. Mebby this ain't so fancy but I reckon you kin put up with it fer the sake of . . ."

Helen tore herself away from his grasp with a little cry. She ran to the far corner of the room where the figure of a man lay outstretched in the dark shadows.

She dropped to her knees beside the still form while the men watched her in astonishment. She fell forward, burying her face on the rain-drenched body, sobbing vehemently.

Harry shot a queer glance at Pat lying on the floor, and asked aloud, "Now what the hell you reckon . . .?"

He strode forward to the girl's side and Helen shrank away from him, her features distorted with grief. "Why didn't you tell me?" she cried out. "Why didn't you tell me dad was here . . . *dead?*"

Harry shook his head, looking completely baffled. "Yore daddy, huh? Shore, that ain't sech a nice thing fer a gal to walk in on. Shore enuff, we didn't know . . ." He swung around to glare at Pat. "Why didn't *you* tell us? Why the hell did you bring him here . . ."

Pat closed his eyes without replying. He needed time to think of an answer. His brain was in a whirl. How could Mose Higgins be here, dead, so many miles from the ranch? They had ridden a couple of hours, he figured. All he could think of was that this circumstance should prove to the girl that he couldn't have done it.

One of the other men standing over him told Harry, "He's passed out again. Want I should douse him with water?"

"Leave him lay." Harry said sharply. He scowled in black indecision. "Somethin' damn funny aboot all of this," he decided. "Wisht Lacy was here to put us straight."

Pat kept his eyes closed and lay inert. He heard the men moving about and familiarizing themselves with the interior of the cabin, which was well stocked with a supply of staple foods, heard Harry order the horses unsaddled and a guard set at the downstream approach.

Through it all, Helen's quiet sobbing in her corner of the big one-roomed cabin was a pitiable background for the other noises.

After a time a fire was got going in the big wood range, and heat and the smell of strong coffee began to permeate the cabin. Pat tried lifting himself, and managed to get up on one elbow. Harry and three others were tipped back in chairs against the wall watching him interestedly. When he showed signs of life, Harry turned to Helen and ordered her roughly, "Cut out yore cryin' an' git yoreself over here to see how bad this wahoo's hurt. Nursin' is a woman's job."

Pat saw Helen hesitate a moment, then slowly come across the room toward him. He eased himself down on his back and stared up at her pinched white face, drained of all emotion except hatred.

With a shock, he realized that her hatred was directed at him. Hell, he couldn't blame her. Not with her thinking he was responsible for her father's death. She listlessly unbottoned his clothes and turned them back to expose the bandages she had placed on his wounds. Her fingers felt icy-cold when they inadvertently touched his bare flesh. After a brief examination, Helen shrank away from him as though he were unclean, and said tonelessly:

"The blood is clotted again. He'll be all right if he stays quiet."

"Don't know as I'd trust her, Harry," one of the armed men spoke up importantly. "Be jest like her to let him bleed to death layin' there."

Helen whirled on the man and flung at him savagely, "You needn't worry about that. I'll do my best to see he doesn't die so easily. He'll live to hang. Do you hear me?" She stamped her foot angrily. "I'll see to that the best I can."

The men guffawed loudly. Harry said, "I don't reckon the gal likes you so much, pard," to Pat.

Pat Stevens lifted himself painfully to a sitting position. Through set teeth he demanded, "Give me a cup of cawfee to warm the inside of my belly."

Without moving from his tilted-back chair, Harry ordered one of the men fussing over the hot stove "Fill him up a cup." Then, to Pat, "You feel like doin' some talkin'?"

"About what?"

"Lotsa things." Harry's voice was even but threatening. "Looks to me like you messed things up good. Why'd you bring that daid man here and then go back an' git yoreself shot an' picked up by a deppity?"

Pat muttered, "Had a right to go back for the gal, didn't I?"

"That was it, huh?" Harry's voice grew colder. "You

know what Lacy says aboot mixin' women with biz-niss."

One of the men handed Pat a cup of steaming coffee. He lifted it shakily to his lips and burned his belly with a draught. His lips curled away from his teeth as strength re-entered his body with the near-boiling potion. Tentatively, he said, "To hell with Lacy."

"Sounds tuh me like yo're gettin' a leetle too smart fer yore pants," Harry grunted. "Got the big-head handlin' things here on yore own for a couple months. Lacy'll take that outta you quick enough."

Pat sat cross-legged, nursing the cup of hot coffee between his calloused palms. He was treading on thin ice and he knew it. Every time he opened his mouth he was in danger of saying the wrong thing and arousing the gang's suspicions. But he was in danger of discovery every moment he sat there anyhow. Mose Higgins' real killer might ride up at any moment and his masquerade as a member of the gang would be pierced. It must have been he who had left that lantern outside after placing Mose's body in the cabin. That meant he expected to return at once. Something must have delayed him, but Pat had no way of knowing how long he would be delayed. He growled:

"I'll take my chances with Lacy." He emptied the cup of strong coffee and felt well again. If he just had a gun in one of his holsters . . .

Harry tipped his chair forward and got up. He strolled forward toward Helen. She backed away from him until the wall cut off her retreat. Harry's cruel mouth twisted into a grin while he slid one arm about her slim waist. He sneered down at Pat:

"Kinda went to a lot of trouble fer nothin', looks like. I ain't gonna be sore at you none fer bringin' this gal aroun' tonight. Won't be so cold sleepin' with her fer company."

"Take yore hands off her," Pat said angrily. "She's my . . ."

Harry guffawed loudly. He pinched Helen's chin. "In the shape yo're in," he told Pat pointedly, "I reckon you couldn't do a gal like this much good."

Pat Stevens lifted himself to his feet with a great effort. He swayed forward drunkenly, then straightened. He took a couple of faltering steps, giving the impression that his knees were ready to buckle under him at any moment. The maneuver brought him close to the man tending the stove.

Pat's right hand snaked out and jerked the man's gun from its holster. He whirled in a half crouch, covering Harry with the weapon. With grim deliberateness, he warned:

"I'll spill yore guts here an' now if you don't turn her loose."

Harry hesitated, then stepped back. The yawning muzzle of the gun followed him unwaveringly. Through set teeth, Pat warned the others, "First man makes a move toward his gun will get Harry drilled plumb center." Then, to the girl, softly, "You come here to me."

Helen lifted her head proudly and stared at him. She was about to refuse, then she blinked two tears from her eyes and obeyed him, crying out in revulsion:

"I can't stand any more shooting and killing. Don't let me be the cause of . . ."

"Shut up." Pat was backing slowly toward the door. He caught her hand and drew her along with him. "First one comes out this door will eat a bellyful of lead," he promised the roomful of men. He groped behind him for the knob, turned it and backed out into the darkness of the night.

Helen cried out piteously and tried to wrench her-

self away from him as the door swung shut. He jerked her back, held her tightly while warning in a hoarse whisper:

"You'll be a whole lot better off out here with me than inside with them. If we work it right maybe we can make out to slip away."

Helen's strength went away from her suddenly. Her body went limp and she would have crumpled to the ground if Pat hadn't slipped his arm about her waist. Supporting her, he backed his way carefully toward the corrals where the unsaddled horses had been put.

6

When Pat Stevens rode away from the Par ES ranch in Powder Valley that Sunday morning, Sam Sloan and one-eyed Ezra stood disconsolately in the doorway and watched him disappear from view.

"Mebby he fooled you with that talk of his'n about goin' to fotch back a baby gal to raise up with Dock," Ezra said to his short, stocky partner, "but he didn't take me in none. Not by a damn sight. Ridin' off slick as yuh please, wearin' them ol' dusty hawg-laigs of his'n." Ezra snorted his disgust loudly, and his single eye gleamed redly in the morning sunlight.

"Fin'ly come to you, did it?" Sam Sloan grinned sourly. "Like a bolt of lightnin' through that thick head of yourn. Shore, Pat ain't ridin' to New Mexico figgerin' on nursemaidin' no baby back. Somethin's in the wind, tha's what. He had that look on his face I've seen plenty times before. More'n likely he's got a line on a rustlin' gang or somethin' like that, an' he's so dang selfish he's plannin' to hog all the shootin' for his ownself."

"Dunno what's gettin' into Pat." Ezra shook his head sorrowfully. "Was a time not so long back when he wouldn't of thought of ridin' off without us. Seems like the ol' pardnerin' days are plumb gone."

Sam Sloan spat disgustedly into the dry, hard-packed dirt outside the door and turned to stalk back into the kitchen. He drained the last half-cup of thick black coffee from the dregs in the graniteware pot and squatted down on his heels with his back against the wall to drink it.

"Stands to reason," Ezra muttered, following him in and dropping his hulk into a creaky straight chair, "that Pat ortn't to go off alone like that without sayin' whatfor to no one. He's a fambly man, Sam."

"I'm s'prised Sally let him wear them guns off. She's bin settin' down on him right hard these las' few years. 'Member how we had to sneak out his guns for him when we went up into the mountains after them blackhoods?"

"Yeh. But she didn't kick up no ruster when you rode back for he'p on that hawse-tradin' mixup las' time. Mebby Sally's got over bein' scairt of havin' him pack hardware."

"Whether she has or not ain't got a damn thing to do with him riding off like he did this mawnin'. Fer a plugged nickel, Ezra, I'd mount up an' Injun after him."

Ezra's broad face brightened for a moment. Then he plunged a ham-like hand into his pocket and jingled some coins. Heavy gloom settled over his broad features once more. He mourned, "I ain't got nary plugged nickel or I'd shore as hell take you up on that, Sam Sloan."

Sam sipped his hot coffee and squinted out of a cob-webby kitchen window. "O' course," he argued half

to himself, "we ain't rightly got no bizniss to take us ridin' down New Mexico way."

"Mebby we could think up some if we was to try right hard." Ezra blinked his single eye shut and screwed up his face in an effort to concentrate on the problem. "Ain't we got no friends livin' near to Santa Alicia?"

"Nary a one. Trouble is, we ain't got no friends nowhere no more." Sam Sloan emptied his coffee cup and arose to pace up and down in front of the stove. "Hibernatin' here on the Bar ES, tha's what we're doin'. Might's well be a couple of b'ars holed up for winter the way we don't never stick our noses out tuh see what's goin' on. Was a time we knowed fellers from the Rio Grande to the Canadian Border. Now we cain't even think of no one to go visit. It's all Pat's fault . . . him settling on the Lazy Mare an' breakin' up the pardnership."

"But Pat, he don't let it tie him down," Ezra put in obliquely. "When he takes a notion, he goes a-ridin'."

"Shore he does." Sam Sloan was gradually working himself up into a lather of rage at the unfairness of it all. His ugly dark features became blacker as he brooded over the blithe manner in which Pat had ridden off alone into danger (or, at least, so Sam fancied).

"That time up in Dusty Canyon," Ezra reminded his smaller partner wistfully, "Pat was mighty damn glad to see us when we popped up unbeknownst to him."

"I'll say he was. Where'd he of been if we hadn't tagged along? Fust thing he did was to git hisself tied up in a cabin by the gang he was after."

"He ain't really fitten to be let out on the trail alone," Ezra asseverated solemnly. "Allus gettin' into

some goshdarned kinda trouble. 'Pears tuh me he's gettin' plumb soft an' gunshy in his old age."

Sam nodded sage assent, both men neglecting the fact that Pat was the youngest of the trio. "That's what it is," Sam agreed. "Old age gettin' into his bones. Too much soft livin'. All he does on the Lazy Mare is set on his fat rump an' watch the hands do the work. When he wants to go ridin' off it don't concern him that there's spring work to be done."

"It'd be nice if we had a couple of hands," said Ezra wistfully. "Then we wouldn't need to worry none neither. Might even ride south our ownselves, huh?"

"Might, at that. But *we* didn't marry no rich widdy, damn it. We got to work like a couple of hired hands to keep the Bar ES goin'." Sam slammed one hard fist into a calloused palm and stalked back and forth with his face black as a thundercloud.

Both of them were silent for a time while their thoughts went back regretfully in retrospect to the old wild days before Pat met the pretty blond widow; when their guns had been their passports to adventure, the hard ground the only beds their weary bodies had known, when life had been interesting and dangerous, not the humdrum existence that now held them chafing on a little ranch in Powder Valley while Pat rode off over the horizon with his holstered guns ready for any new adventure that might come his way.

The sound of a trotting horse outside obtruded on their silent thoughts. Both men jerked their heads around to listen, an expression of expectant hope on their faces. Both men were thinking the same thing: that Pat had relented and was riding back to get them to accompany him southward.

Sam grinned at Ezra and winked slyly, "The ol' son-of-a-gun," he said happily, "he got softenin' of the

heart after he rode off a ways . . . or else he got scairt thinkin' of tacklin' a job on his lonesome. Le's us pretend we ain't bin studyin' none aboot him . . . that we don't give a plumb damn what he does." He turned to the stove and began rattling the pans noisily. The ridden horse had stopped outside the door. Ezra got up with an answering boyish grin. "We'll pertend we're s'prised as hell that he come back fer us." He bent over and gathered up the breakfast dishes with his back to the door.

They heard a pounding on the wooden panels outside. Ezra looked at Sam and winked his one eye, his big face wreathed in a grin of anticipation. Sam Sloan rattled the pots more loudly and wondered why the hell Pat didn't come on in without standing on ceremony.

They heard the door creak open, but both perversely kept their backs turned, determined to prove to Pat that they weren't at all interested in his comings and goings.

A nasal voice from the doorway brought them both upright and staring. Quite the leanest and dirtiest cow-waddy either of them had ever seen stood there with a wad of chewing tobacco bulging his cheek. He had merely asked, innocently enough, "Is this yere the Bar ES spread?" and he was completely taken back by the malevolent glares that met his query.

Ezra, a fearsome object at any time, took a pace forward and it seemed to the puncher that red flames shot from his one eye as he demanded thunderously, "Where at is Pat Stevens? What've you did with him?"

The lean puncher stepped backward hastily, throwing up one arm as though to fend off Ezra's approach. "I dunno what you're talking about," he gasped, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing up and down agitatedly. "I swear, mister, I don't know . . ."

"Leave him be, Ezra," grated Sam Sloan. " 'Tain't his fault it ain't Pat ridin' back like we guessed. Come on in," he invited the puncher ungraciously. "Ridin' the chuck line?"

"Uh-huh. Sorta." The long-legged puncher took a fearful step forward, still staring in awe at Ezra's threatening face. "I ain't lookin' to make no trouble," he faltered. "Heard you rannies had a right nice little spread here an' might need some help durin' the spring work."

Sam started to shake his head, then stopped the motion suddenly. He glanced quickly at his big partner, "Hear that, Ezra?"

"Shore I heard him. I ain't deef. But we ain't hirin' no han's . . ."

"Why ain't we?" demanded Sam belligerently. "Cain't you see this puncher was *sent?*"

"Sent by who?" rumbled Ezra, wrinkling his brow and shaking his head in perplexity.

"By God, I reckon." Sam turned to stare at the man carefully. "Though I must say I don't see no wings sproutin' yet."

The man's mouth gaped open. He took a hasty step backward while his eyes bugged out. No one had warned him a couple of lunatics ran the Bar ES.

"He's a mighty stringy-lookin' article to be sproutin' wings," Ezra declared. "I swanny, Sam, sometimes I wonder . . ."

"Wasn't we jest wishin' we could get off the ranch for a pasear into New Mexico?" Sam asked happily. "But we didn't see how we could cut 'er with all the spring work to be did. So this feller walks in . . . like the answer to a prayer . . . if either of us knowed how to pray."

"You mean we're gonna hire *him?*"

"No one else but. You're workin' awready," Sam

told the astonished job-seeker with a wide sweep of his hand. "You can start in on these here kitchen dishes while Ezra an' me pack our extry pair of socks fer a little ride. We'll tell you all what's gotta be done an' then she's yores till we git back."

"By golly, Sam, yo're right." Ezra strode forward and grabbed the hungry-looking rider, swept him into a bear hug and executed an ecstatic buck and wing while the astonished new Bar ES employee vainly sought to escape.

Thus, like a couple of schoolboys happily playing hookey, the two partners rode away from the ranch and set their mounts on the road to Santa Alicia not more than three hours behind Pat Stevens.

With carbines swinging in leather boots beneath their stirrup leathers, and short guns securely belted about their hips, they were ready for anything—and fervently hoping that the *anything* would not prove an uneventful ride in Pat's tracks merely to help him bring home an orphaned child as he had intimated was his sole reason for making the trip.

They had a hunch that Pat was going to need their help badly before they saw Powder Valley again—and like many of their hunches in the past, this one was due to get a good workout sooner than either of them expected.

7

SAM SLOAN and Ezra rode into Santa Alicia a little before midnight. They were wet and cold from the rain that had fallen earlier in the evening, stiff and tired from their long ride south on Pat Stevens' trail.

The little New Mexico cow-town presented a dreary

and dejected attitude to the pair of travelers in search of shelter and hot food. The adobe buildings were grouped about a typical Mexican plaza and only a few of them were lighted at that hour of the night. Sam and Ezra pulled up in front of the only two-story building in town and wearily dismounted. Their mounts stood apathetically at the hitch-rail with drooped heads. A weathered sign above the entrance told the travelers they had stopped at the Palace Hotel.

There was an uncarpeted lobby strewn with aged chairs and tarnished spittoons. A wizened Mexican was snoring in a rocking chair behind the scarred pine counter. Flies hovered about his open mouth and it appeared that only the violent outdrafts prevented them from entering and setting up housekeeping.

Sam and Ezra thumped their booted heels loudly on the bare floor from the door to the desk, but did not arouse the sleeping Mexican.

Sam leaned over the counter and studied the situation intently while Ezra forgot his cold and hunger as he waited to see what his partner's strategy would be.

After a comprehensive survey, Sam cupped one hand and made a swipe at the horde of flies buzzing in the air above the sleeper's face. He caught three of them and crushed them lightly so they could not fly away, then delicately dropped them one by one into the yawning, toothless cavity.

The Mexican snapped his gums together after the third fly landed on his palate. He swallowed hard and sucked in withered cheeks with a look of supreme gratification.

"By gum, he et 'em," Ezra whispered loudly and excitedly. "D'yuh see that, Sam? Swallowed 'em whole like a doggone fly-eatin' lizard."

Sam pushed his Stetson back and scratched his head

dubiously. "Mebby they're a special breed he raises up fer eatin' purposes . . ."

At that precise instant the withered old Mexican erupted from his rocking chair. One brown hand went clawing to his throat while strange, gurgling noises spewed from his mouth. His eyes bulged as he spit out first one bedraggled fly and then another.

"Tha's what comes," Sam Sloan told him severely, "fer not wearin' a veil when you go to steal yoreself a few winks. Them doggone flies smelt yore breath an' thought they was divin' head-first into a deelishus garbage pail."

Only two flies came out after repeated clearings of his throat and spitting. The Mexican stared at them in complete fascination and muttered, "Madre de Dios. She are not good for taste, señores."

"Them others that you swallered must of went down without tastin'," Sam suggested. "Now that you've had yore midnight snack, what's chances fer a dry bed an' stable room fer a couple of hawses?"

"Sí, señores. Thees hotel, she ees best in New Mexico." The Mexican swept the pair of crippled flies from the pine counter with a magnificent gesture of unconcern, swiveled a ledger around in front of his guests and raised his voice in a shrill shout:

"Miguel! Que tiene, muchacho? Vengese aqui, pronto."

While Sam signed the register with a flourish, "U. S. Grant and Teddy Roosevelt, Washington, D. C.," a sleepy-eyed, brown-skinned youth emerged yawning from an inner door.

"Take thees men for show them her room," the old Mexican ordered importantly. "Number twenty-three, she ees empty tonight, I theenk."

The youth nodded sleepily and turned to a long

corridor leading off from the lobby. Ezra followed him, but Sam lingered at the desk. "How aboot our hawses?"

"They weel have of the best, señor. Por Dios, yes." The Mexican lifted both hands and waved them in an effort to indicate the sumptuous manner in which their mounts would be cared for. "Miguel weel see that los caballos are made happy weeth food and water."

Sam nodded and trailed Ezra and the boy up the corridor. Miguel had opened the door of a cold, drafty bedroom and was lighting a kerosene lamp on a rickety table beside the double bed. He had a difficult time making connections with his match and the wick because he was staring at Ezra's one eye with morbid interest.

"The señor ees sick weeth the eye badness?" he asked politely as the wick finally caught and flared up.

"Ezra got his eye hurt when he squashed a boy like you onct between his two hands because he ast too many questions," Sam growled. "Piece of bone out of his head flew up an' jabbed him square in the eye. You better git out an' tend to our hawses before he takes another notion like that. Might finish off blindin' hisself if he squashes you."

The youth backed away apprehensively, staring at Ezra's huge hands which looked fully capable of mashing a bone out of an inquisitive boy's head. He breathed, "Sí, señores. Sí, sí," then whirled and escaped into the corridor before Ezra could possibly get hold of him.

"You do tell the damnedest lies," Ezra said placidly. "How-come you hate the truth like you do, Sam?"

"I'm sorta out of practice," Sam sighed. "Ain't had no call to think up lies back in Powder Valley for quite a spell." He flipped the covers back from a

lumpy cornhusk mattress, scratched a match on the seat of his pants and bent over to pass the flame close to the seams in the worn ticking.

"Night-crawlers?" Ezra asked interestedly.

"Don't see none." Sam sounded faintly disappointed. "We'll know by mawnin'."

"C'mon," Ezra said impatiently. "Le's sashay out an' hunt some grub. My belly's so empty I'll hafta be huntin' some props to keep her from cavin' if I don't get it stuffed out pronto."

"A drink er two fust to sorta warm up our guts so they won't freeze the food goin' down," Sam decreed as they stepped out of the lobby into the still, moonlit night. "Then we'll see what can we find out aboot this Mose Higgins feller, and whether Pat's hit town ahaid of us."

They strolled along the hard-packed dirt sidewalk toward a low corner building where light and music were streaming under a pair of swinging doors. Half a dozen saddled horses waited patiently at the hitching rail outside.

They pushed into a low barroom lit by lanterns swinging overhead from bare rafters. A couple of men were slouched at the bar, behind which was a baldheaded bartender languidly picking his teeth with a gold spike suspended around his neck by a thin chain. The music came from an inside room curtained off from the front.

Sam Sloan said, "Whisky fer me an' panther sweat fer my friend," planting his stocky body at the end of the bar.

The two men turned their heads and gave Ezra and him a long, steady stare of appraisal. Ezra nudged his partner and growled, "Looks like they're wonderin' whether we're human."

One of the men was a tall, cadaverous individual

wearing blue overalls and a frayed white shirt. Beady black eyes were sunk back in great hollows, and a drooping black mustache curled down past the ends of a wide unsmiling mouth.

His companion was a spruce young cowboy wearing a black sateen shirt with a red polka-dot bow tie. He had blue eyes, chubby cheeks, and a round smiling mouth. He was far from sober. He snickered as he overheard Ezra's remark.

The bartender slopped liquor on the bar in front of the Powder Valley pair. They tipped their glasses and held them out for refills. The tall man was whispering in the ear of his young companion, and the puncher kept glancing down the bar and nodding, his eyes round and owlish.

Sam Sloan set his glass down hard after emptying it the second time. He asked the bartender loudly, "We the only white men that ever come in this place?"

The bartender cleared his throat and glanced dubiously at his other two customers. The tall man tugged at his companion's sleeve and led him away toward the back room. The bartender turned back with a scowl:

"What'd you mean by that crack, feller? Couldn't you see them two are white too?"

Sam shook his head placidly. "Way they was lookin' at us an' whisperin', I thought we was plumb curiosities. Who are they?"

"Tall feller's Nate Leadbetter. Gambles some. Other kid is Ned Leroy. His daddy is sort of the high-powered politico hereabouts. He's a good-meanin' boy but crazy as a loon. Ol' Tom Leroy kicked him outta home couple of months ago 'an told him to make it out to shift for himself for a spell."

Sam nodded and said, "I reckon yo're the feller I been lookin' for," to the loquacious bartender. "Know

a rancher named Mose Higgins north of town?"

An extraordinary change came over the bartender. He backed away from Sloan, and the friendly expression disappeared from his face. He asked shortly, "What you want with Mose?"

"What's it matter what I want with him?"

The rich mahogany color of the bartender's face turned to a pasty yellow. He shook his head. "I ain't meanin' tuh get mixed up in Mose's troubles."

"What kinda troubles?"

"I ain't sayin' this or that. Look, mister," pleaded the bartender, "suppose we say them drinks were on the house an' you fellers mosey along?"

Sam Sloan scowled at him. Ezra laughed happily. "Seein' the drinks're on the house, what say we have another, Sam?"

Sam nodded and they shoved out their glasses. The bartender's hand shook so that he spilled liquor over the counter as he tried to refill the glasses. He quavered, "You fellers are the ones Mose has been expectin' to hit town, I reckon?"

"Go ahead an' reckon," said Sam angrily. He tossed off his drink and strode toward the curtained doorway at the back of the saloon. Ezra followed him after a wistful look at the whisky bottle which still contained some liquor.

Three cowpunchers were awkwardly dancing with a trio of female entertainers in the rear room. The music was furnished by a tinny piano and a guitar. Only two of a dozen tables around the small dance-floor were occupied. Ned Leroy and Nate Leadbetter were whispering over cups of coffee at one table. A broad-faced young man sat alone at another table and watched the dancers with sullen eyes.

"Looks like this is what we were lookin' for," Sam said to Ezra when he saw a white-jacketed Mexican

waiter going into the kitchen with a tray of dirty dishes. "Food *an'* music, both at one an' the same time."

The waiter took their orders for steaks and fried potatoes. Ezra leaned forward and rumbled, "What you reckon made him ac' so funny when you jest asked about Mose Higgins?"

Sam lifted his voice to be heard above the loud music from close behind them. "How do I know? It jest proves what we suspicioned all the time. This Mose Higgins is some kind of bad medicine. Tha's why Pat high-tailed it down here like a hawse with turpentine under his tail."

The music ended and the half dozen dancers scattered off the floor to tables where they ordered drinks. The white-jacketed waiter was very busy for a short time.

The sullen-eyed young man got up and came to their table as they started to wolf into tough steaks and soggy potatoes. He pulled up a chair and dropped into it without an invitation, asked peremptorily: "Strangers in Santa Alicia?"

"What if we are?" snapped Sam Sloan, while Ezra carefully laid down his knife and fork and rubbed his big palms together.

The young man said, "Nothing . . . much." Then, "My name is Adams."

"Ain't that nice?" beamed Ezra. "Don't b'lieve I ever hit a man named Adams before, did I, Sam?"

"Deputy sheriff," the young man put in hastily.

"Aw hell!" Ezra's grin faded from his disfigured face. "That sorta ruins things, don't it?" he queried anxiously of Sam. "I've smacked lotsa depitty sheriffs."

"But none named Adams," Sam pointed out. "That makes it awright."

"What's all this crazy stuff about?" demanded the

young deputy, drawing back a bit and nervously dropping a hand to his gun-butt.

Sam Sloan said gently, "We're usta pickin' the company that sets at our table when we're eatin'."

"Oh, I . . . well, I see." Adams got up. He hesitated as though about to say something further, then turned and strode out into the barroom.

"Things're lookin' up," Sam Sloan observed happily. "If we could jest find the mayor now, an' spit in his left eye, we might really git some action."

"I should ort to've smacked him, Sam," mourned Ezra. "I just didn't cotton to his way a-tall."

"There'll be plenty of chances fer that again," Sam comforted him. "Pour that chuck down so you'll get yore stren'th back. I got me a feelin' we're headin' right into the middle of a whirlwind without no compasses to say which way is which."

The music started again and the dancers swung back into action. Ezra scraped his plate clean and wolfed down the potatoes left by Sam, and was on the point of ordering another serving all around when the square-faced deputy sheriff re-entered the room by the side of a tall hawk-faced man with a livid scar running diagonally from the outer corner of his left eye down to the point of his chin.

He wore two black-butted six-guns tied low for a fast draw in open holsters, and there was a bleak, hungry look on his face as he strode directly toward the table occupied by Ezra and Sam.

"That's them," panted the deputy from one pace to the rear. "Like I was telling you . . ."

Sam's chair lurched backward and he went for his gun. He wasn't fast enough to beat chain lightning. The scarred-face man had time to fire only one shot before the table, propelled by Ezra's foot, up-ended and dumped crockery over him.

Then someone whooped and began shooting out the lanterns.

8

THE DEPUTY and his two-gunned companion went to the floor under the weight of the heavy wooden table as a bullet splintered the first lantern. Ezra scrambled over the floor after them with a bull-like roar.

The stranger's bullet had smashed Sam Sloan's gun out of his hand as he drew, leaving him unwounded but with his fingers numb. The interior of the dance hall was a crazy tumult of shrill screams from the girls and whoops of glee from the cow-punchers.

Another lantern went out as Ezra reached the scarred-faced gunman and got one of his big hands about his lean neck. From the floor behind Ezra, Sam was shouting for him to come on and get out of the mix-up, but Sam's words were indistinguishable in the general hubbub.

Sitting on the floor, Ezra began enthusiastically throttling the deputy's companion.

A bullet splintered the third lantern suspended from the ceiling plunging the dance hall into darkness. Silence came with the darkness, as though the inmates of the room were suddenly appalled by what had happened.

Ezra heard Sam panting angrily in his ear, "C'mon in a hurry. Let's get out the back way."

Happy to know that his runty partner was still alive, Ezra gave a grunt of approval. He lunged to his feet, dragging the man up with him and tossing him over his shoulder like a sack of oats. He stum-

bled forward in the darkness behind Sam with one arm clamped tightly about the man's arms and body to prevent him from using his guns.

Sam drove shoulder-first into the swinging door leading to the lighted kitchen. A Mexican chef jumped back out of their way as they stampeded through his kitchen and out a rear door into a refuse-strewn alley.

Sam heard Ezra pounding along behind him, and he didn't slow up or look back until they had run the length of the alley and emerged into the open on the outskirts of the village. He drew up, panting loudly, in the shadow of a group of cottonwoods on the bank of a small irrigation ditch.

Ezra stopped beside him as Sam muttered, "Hell of a mess now. We dasn't go back fer our hawses . . ."

"Most damn fun I've had in a coon's age," Ezra chortled. "Reminds me of the time . . ."

"What gets me is what started all the shootin'." Sam sank down on his haunches, exhausted, and dragged papers and a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket.

"Sorta seemed to me like that depitty took a dislikin' to us. I shoulda smacked him one when he fust sat down at our table." Ezra gently lowered his captive from his shoulder, catching the man's two wrists tightly in a grip that was like the pressure of a giant iron vise.

Sam had his head bent and was carefully pouring flaked tobacco in a pouched cigarette paper. "I cain't figger out where the deputy got holt of the gunslingin' gent, or why. He wasn't gone more'n ten minutes. Of course, the bartender mighta tol' him we'd asked aboot Mose Higgins . . . an' that seems a bad subjec' hereaboots. But, man alive, how that man

went fer his hardware. Caught me flat-footed *an'* standin' still. I'd shore admire tuh meet up with him ag'in . . ."

"What you mumbling about?" asked Ezra placidly. "Here he is waitin' to meet up with you."

Sam came uncoiled like a released spring. He jumped a foot off the ground and came down peering through the black shadow cast by the trees at Ezra and the tall man standing by his side. He stared unbelievingly for a long minute, then shakily, "You mean to say . . . you brung him along?"

"Shore. I h'isted him onto my shoulder when you said we was gettin' out. Thought you might want to ast him some questions."

"Gawd A'mighty," breathed Sam in an awed tone. He stepped closer and plucked the man's left-hand gun from his holster, made sure the other holster was empty, then demanded angrily:

"Awright, mister. Start talkin'."

He was rewarded with a string of oaths in a vitriolic undertone.

Ezra tightened his grasp on the wrists until the bones gave forth warning cracklings as though they were about to splinter under the pressure. The oaths gave way to a shrill exhalation of pain.

"That's a mite of a sample," Ezra told him placidly. "Start talkin' afore I really go to work on you."

"All right," the man snarled. "What do you want I should talk about?"

"What's yore name?"

"None of yore damn . . . Jeff Caudry."

"Hold it," Sam whispered tensely. "I hear men a-comin'." He jammed the muzzle of the tall stranger's gun into his belly and warned him, "One yelp outta you an' you'll never yelp no more."

Excited voices were approaching them from the di-

rection of town. Farther away, in the other direction, a dog yelped and the hoofbeats of a trotting horse came through the silent night to the listening trio.

"We best cross the ditch," Sam muttered. "Strike out into the open an' see can we locate us a couple of hawses . . ."

He started forward, relaxing the vigilance of his gun-hand for a single fatal instant. Caudry threw himself sideways and dived beyond the huge trunks of the cottonwoods which gave him momentary shelter from the lead Sam blazed after him. Then he was running into the darkness and shouting loudly, and Sam wasted two more futile shots after him.

The blast of lead was answered by shouts from the searching party.

Sam grated, "We're caught now," and paused indecisively. "He heard us plannin' to take out acrost the creek . . ."

"Which we better not do," Ezra remarked quietly. He stretched one long arm upward and caught a heavy horizontal limb above his head, snaked his heavy body upward as lithely as any circus performer on a trapeze.

Astride the heavy limb, he leaned down and caught an outstretched hand of his smaller partner, yanked Sam up effortlessly beside him.

They could see the advancing men now. A dozen or more, it appeared in the dim moonlight.

"We'd best climb up a couple of limbs," Ezra suggested, "so's to be hid if one of 'em takes a notion to r'ar back an' look upwards."

"Not much chance of that," Sam scoffed as they carefully climbed up and settled themselves on a sturdy perch screened from view below by the green leaves. "None of 'em knowin' you got monkey blood in you. If I hadn't of let that feller jerk away . . ."

"Better off up here than fast-footin' it acrost the sand dunes," Ezra opined in a whisper. "Mebby we kin hear somethin' that'll make sense . . ."

Sam shhhed him as the group of excited villagers arrived beneath the tree. They could hear Jeff Caudry's thin voice explaining:

"Last I saw of them they was streaking out across there on the other side the ditch. Wouldn't stay and fight, damn 'em, even if they did have both my guns."

An excited mixture of Mexican and English voices broke out underneath the tree. Men on horseback began to converge on the group from various directions and were hastily dispatched across the ditch in the direction Ezra and Sam were presumed to have fled.

"Big feller's strong as a six-mule team," Jeff Caudry assured each one who came up to shoot excited questions at him. "Damn near choked me between his thumb and one finger. Dragged me off here like I was a bantam rooster and he aimed to wring my neck."

And to those who wanted to know what the dance hall fracas was all about:

"They're outlaws, all right. Lacy's gang. One of 'em's Lacy hisse'f, I betcha. Clarence put me onto 'em. He had a run-in with 'em first, and got suspicious. Then when Baldy told him how they'd got tough with Ned Leroy and Nate at the bar and then asked about Mose Higgins . . . well, Clarence caught on right now that they must be a couple of Lacy's gang drifting in to size things up. Not wanting to tackle 'em single-handed, Clarence just nachully stepped out and deputized me. Lucky he did, too," Caudry ended, not too modestly. "The way that short feller went for his gun was a caution. All *I* could do to throw my lead first, and you boys know that means he's *fast*. And that big one-eyed buzzard . . . stronger'n any ten men, I'm telling you the straight of it."

A rider came galloping up to interrupt Jeff Caudy's monologue. From their insecure perch high in the tree, Sam and Ezra heard him called "Sheriff Petrillo," and from his softly accented voice they gathered that the sheriff of Santa Alicia was of Mexician descent, no uncommon occurrence in a state where a large majority of the qualified voters were Mexicans.

The sheriff assumed charge immediately and with quiet competence, dispatching all the remaining mounted men to take up the search for the fugitives, and dispersing the unmounted villagers back to town.

Two men lingered behind in the edge of the shadow after the others had gone. From their voices, Sam and Ezra recognized them as the stocky, sullen-faced deputy who had introduced himself as Adams, and his fast-shooting friend with the scarred face.

They were rolling cigarettes and exchanging commonplaces about the affair until they felt sure all the others were beyond hearing distance, then Adams began to swear at his companion angrily:

"God damn it, Caudry. That was the damnedest bungling I ever saw. Why in hell did you shoot that black-faced fellow's gun out of his hand instead of drilling him? I told you . . ."

"Listen, baby-face." Caudry's voice twanged like a tight wire. "When you're shooting as fast as I was shooting tonight you don't have time for aiming. I didn't see you throwing *any* lead."

"I was standing behind you and couldn't get my gun out," the deputy muttered defensively. "And I want to know what was the matter with Ned Leroy, too. He sat there and didn't even go for his gun."

"You better jump that fool Pete Bemis for shooting the lights out," Caudry declared. "Hadn't been for that we'd had 'em."

"Oh, I reckon we've got them anyhow. They can't

get far on foot. I wish to God this was all over, Jeff. I'm getting jumpy and I don't care who knows it."

"Worried about that gal, hey?"

"Well, why shouldn't I be? Listen. What about that other man tonight . . . the rannie that dropped by Higgins' ranch? You reckon he's in on this, too? Or was he telling the truth about accidentally stopping to get out of the rain?"

"I thought first-off, like you, he must of been the feller Mose was expecting, but now I dunno. Those two yahoos tonight fill the bill too good. I'd say one of us ought to ride up Lonesome Creek and put a bug in Harry's ear. The damn fool should of rekernized you tonight. If you'd just told him . . ."

"Hell, I couldn't. I couldn't tell him anything. Not with Helen right there listening," Clarence Adams exploded in a harassed tone. "I was damn glad he made the mistake he did and carried the feller off, but I'll see Lacy gives him hell for grabbing the girl too."

"You'd better stay clear of Lacy till this is over, the way you've bungled things. You wouldn't know him anyhow," Caudry boasted. "No one does but me. Lots of times when he's working up a whing-do like he's got figured for Santa Alicia he drifts into town weeks ahead and hangs around unbeknownst to any of the gang. But he's watching, don't you ever forget that."

There was an implied threat in Jeff Caudry's words that did not escape the young deputy. He replied nervously, "Sure. Sure, I know how Lacy works." Then, "We'd better start drifting back to town. Do you want to ride up Lonesome Creek, or should I wait a time to do it?"

They were strolling away from the cottonwoods by that time, and Caudry's reply was lost in the distance.

High up on the leafy perch, Sam Sloan moved his legs cautiously and then let out a soft groan.

"Damn if I ain't growed here," he muttered. "Hol' my hand, Ezra, while I see can I tear myse'f loose an' drop down to the next limb."

"We might build us a nest and settle here," Ezra suggested hopefully. "I've got so I kinda like this ol' tree."

"We're ridin' up Lonesome Crik," Sam said shortly. "An' we ain't losin' no time aboot it neither."

He slid off the limb cautiously, swayed downward like a pendulum while his feet groped for the lower limb. His strained muscles gave way suddenly and he went crashing downward, bouncing from one limb to another and finally ending in a disgruntled heap at the foot of the tree.

Ezra leaned down and queried anxiously, "Any bones broke?" and was answered by a volley of abuse.

"Whyn't you catch me, you thick-headed ape? Hell no, I ain't hurt. Jest figgered that was the quickest way to get down. Why don't you try it your ownself?"

"Reckon I will," Ezra called from above. There was a great crashing of limbs and Sam jumped back out of the way just in time to escape the catapulting form of his partner.

But Ezra hit solidly on both feet with a loud thud and announced cheerfully, "Yep, yo're right. That's the easiest way to get out of a tree. What do we do now?" he asked forthrightly. "Every mother's son hereabouts is lookin' for us with cocked guns."

"Nine-tenths of the mothers' sons are out yonder scourin' the prairie for us," Sam drawled. "Seems to me like it'd be smart for us to mosey right back to the hotel stable an' saddle our hawses. No one'll be lookin' fer us to do that. Then we'll find out where this Lonesome Crik place is an' take a look-see out there."

"Sounds plumb crazy to me," said Ezra in a pleased

tone. "So, c'mon." As they left the concealing shadow of the cottonwoods and began cautiously circling the darkened adobe homes in the direction of the rear of the Palace Hotel, he asked Sam:

"What'd you make of that talk we heard back yonder? Didn't make sense to me. Fust off, they think we're outlaws an' start gunnin' for us soon as we ask aboot Mose Higgins . . . then the depitty an' scarface, *they* wanta get us because *they're* tied up with some gang an' *they* think we're bad medicine because we asked fer Higgins. Oh hell, I'm all mixed up," he ended hopelessly. "It don't make sense nohow."

"Course it don't. Not the way you tell it. Now, the way 'tis . . . well, it's like this. The sheriff an' everbody else thinks . . . oh hell! I dunno what anybody thinks. But they're all gunnin' fer us. We gotta keep out of sight till we find out what's what. Now, this here alley ought to lead us back of the hotel, I reckon. An' the stable ought to be back of the hotel. I'm hopin' that Miguel is the only stableboy. Le's take it easy down this alley. . . ."

They moved along cautiously, keeping close to the shadows cast by the low walls of buildings until at last they came to a lantern hanging out at the end of a rafter faintly illuminating a faded sign that said, "Palace Livery Stable."

"Here she is," Sam muttered with satisfaction. There were sliding wooden doors closed tightly on the alley entrance. Ezra exerted his strength and one of them slid back on rusty iron runners with a protesting squeak.

They hesitated, waiting to be challenged from inside, but when no voice was lifted inside the stable they slid into the dark interior and found a double row of wooden stalls occupied by half a dozen horses.

It was the work of only a few minutes in the dark-

ness to pick out their own mounts and their familiar rigging, and only a few more before they had them saddled and led them outside.

As they swung into the saddle, Ezra looked regretfully at the two-story hotel and muttered, "That lumpy bed wouldn't feel half bad to my bones right now."

"Damn if you ain't gettin' soft an' lazy-like, jest like Pat," Sam sneered. He was in the saddle leading the way slowly to the mouth of the alley. "Call yorese'f lucky we didn't end up sleepin' in that cottonwood tree."

They were at the end of the alley when a sleepy Mexican voice from the sidewalk hailed them:

"Quien es?"

"Pablo Gonzales y Pedro Martinez," Sam mumbled.

"Bueno, compadres." The Mexican guardian of the alley stepped back to let them pass, satisfied that they were members of his own race and not the two gringo outlaws.

Sam reined up when they were opposite the Mexican and asked him in fluent Mexican for directions to Lonesome Creek.

The answer came readily enough, explicit directions for riding directly to the creek where it spread out from the mountain ravine into the sandy plain.

Sam thanked his informer with a flourish, and he and Ezra put their tired horses to a trot. In a few minutes the little town of Santa Alicia was swallowed up in the desert darkness behind them.

9

THE CLOP-CLOP from the hoofs of trotting horses was the only sound in the soft desert night. The air was

clean and fresh and pleasantly cool, washed by the recent rain. The sky was overcast with only a few fleecy clouds now, through which the moonlight was filtered downward in a soft glow that touched the barren desert with enchantment.

The harsh outlines of gaunt sand dunes were obliterated in the faint light, giving them a mysterious allure that beckoned the riders on. Great cacti that grew upward to enormous heights of scraggly trunks, topped with warped branches that reached upward to the sun, took on the fantastic appearance of weary old men with bowed heads and thin arms raised in supplication; occasional clumps of mesquite and catclaw lost their forbidding, thorny look and appeared to be pleasant green shrubs scattered along the desert floor.

Moonlight on the desert is a mystical experience for any man, and has a way of evoking a brooding sense of reverie that sweeps away the obtrusive realities of life and brings a curious feeling of contentment to those who live close to nature and respond to her varying moods.

Simple men of the saddle and of the gun, without book-learning and without the proper words to express their innermost feelings had they not been too shy to attempt to do so, Ezra and Sam Sloan were conscious of a close-knit harmony between themselves and the God who directs the destinies of men as they rode toward Lonesome Creek from Santa Alicia.

Either man would have been ashamed to utter such words had he thought them out consciously, but the quality of kinship was there, expressing itself in a sublime faith in themselves and in their ability to override all obstacles that might confront them on the trail ahead.

What those obstacles would be, they had not the slightest idea. As yet, they scarcely knew *why* they were in Santa Alicia. They had ridden south with a vague idea that Pat Stevens might need their help. They wouldn't have called it a quixotic impulse that had thrown them into the white heat of danger. To them, the motive was much simpler than that. A friend was riding into danger and they, perforce, were riding with him. Tonight, death had brushed them with his black wings, but death had often been their trail-companion before. They knew that every man must die, and that no man dies until his time has come. The complexities of living and dying become just that simple when men ride the desert at moonlight and there is silence and beauty about them.

After more than an hour of steady riding, they began to leave the sand dunes behind them and entered the rolling foothills of the mountains far northward. Sam broke the silence that had enveloped them since leaving Santa Alicia:

"Ought to be comin' on that Lonesome Crik hereaboots. That Mex said six miles."

"I reckon it cain't be much further." Ezra hesitated, then asked, "Did you mind what the depitty sheriff an' Caudry said aboot another feller turnin' up at Higgins' ranch tonight?"

"Yep. I heard 'em."

"You reckon it mighta been Pat?"

"I reckon it wasn't nobody else. Pat was ahaid of us all the way but we didn't see nothin' of him in Santa Alicia."

"Said somethin' aboot the gang carryin' Pat off," Ezra mused.

"Yep. With a gal. Reckon mebby we'll carry back a earful for Sally." Sam chuckled waggishly.

"This looks like the place that Mex told us about."

Ezra reined up on the edge of a tiny stream trickling out from the mouth of a wide shallow canyon.

"Looks like Lonesome Crik, awright. Course, we don't know where on Lonesome Crik that Harry feller will be hidin' out. Reckon if we foller her up into the hills we'll come onto somethin'."

Ezra said, "Le's follow her," and headed his horse up into the wide canyon.

Sam Sloan spurred his horse up beside Ezra's and they jogged along in silence for another long period.

They didn't exactly know what they were looking for up the creek. They had heard Jeff Caudry and Clarence Adams agree that one of them should ride out later and contact a man named Harry with some sort of warning. And there had been a vague hint that Pat Stevens and some girl might have been taken up the creek by Harry. Both men had a crazy hunch that they might be riding toward the headquarters of the gang, and it was this hunch that kept them riding confidently forward. They wanted desperately to come to grips with a substantial enemy, one that would stand up and fight instead of dissolving into nothingness.

"You ever hear of the feller, Lacy, they talked about tonight?" Ezra asked after a long time.

"Seems to me like I have." Sam's tone indicated that he had been giving that particular subject a great deal of thought. "But I cain't remember jest what I've heard about him," he ended lamely. "Whether 'twas good er bad."

"I'm betting it was bad. Way they talked, he's got some kind of a clean-up figgered here."

"And Mose is in it some way."

"Yep. Sounded like that. But I still don't see how Mose Higgins is mixed up with a thing like that.

From what Pat told us, Higgins sounded like a right decent hombre."

"You know, I been thinkin' about that." Sam's voice was distinctly worried. "Pat didn't really know nothin' about him 'cept meetin' him that one time when Pat was high-tailin' it from a posse. Course, you an' me know Pat hadn't done nothin' wrong. Knowin' Pat like we do, *we* wouldn't of asked any questions neither. We would of done jest what Higgins did. But, damn it, Ezra! *Higgins* didn't know Pat. All he knowed was that Pat was a stranger on the run from the law. So he takes Pat in an' hides him an' he'ps him make a get-away."

"Which was a damn fine thing to do," Ezra put in. "I hope you ain't gonna blame him for doin' that."

"Damn it, Ezra, that's jest what I'm talkin' aboot. Shore it was a fine thing, because *we* know Pat was innercent. But Higgins didn't ask no questions. What I mean is . . . he woulda done jest the same if Pat had been that woman-killer the posse thought he was. Chew on that for a while."

Ezra rode on silently for a full five minutes while he fought against the inescapable logic of Sam's deductions. Sam was right, b'God. The way Higgins had treated Pat that time came near proving Higgins *wasn't* a law-abiding citizen. Still, he had saved Pat's life. No two ways about it. He voiced that thought to Sam.

Sam agreed vigorously. "Shore, he did. I ain't denyin' it. An I ain't blamin' Pat fer ridin' down to he'p him. But it all sorta points to mebby a tie-up in the ol' days between Higgins an' some outlaw bunch. This same Lacy gang, mebby. Mebby Mose turned honest, an' then his ol' pards found out where he was an' pressured him to help them in whatever plans they got now. *I* shore don't know. But it mebby explains

the way them folks in Santa Alicia acted when we showed up an' asked fer Mose Higgins. That's all I'm sayin'."

"Yep. Sounds plenty reasonable," Ezra agreed dubiously. "Right up ahaid yonder," he changed the subject, "looks like the canyon narrers down."

They were approaching the point where Pat Stevens had entered the canyon with his armed escort some time previously. It was the highest feasible point of entrance into the canyon, for the walls narrowed sharply just beyond, becoming too steep for a rider to make it down from the top.

"Yep. There's a side road comin' into it right there," Sam agreed. "I reckon we keep right on up . . ."

They were passing the point where the side road joined their trail through a dense thicket of stunted juniper when a hoarse, strained voice warned them:

"Stop where you are and put your hands up. You're covered."

They stopped and slowly lifted their hands, craning their necks toward the juniper thicket whence the voice came.

"That's the way." The voice was young and harshly exultant. "I figured some of you coyotes would be riding this way. Keep your hands high. I'd like nothing better than an excuse to drill you both."

"He means it," Sam muttered out of the side of his mouth. "Sounds like he's got a itchy trigger finger. Don't start nothin' yet a while."

"I ain't startin' nothin'," mourned Ezra. "If my arms start saggin' it'll only be a weakness of the flesh."

"What do you want with us?" Sam demanded of the

unseen dry-gulcher. "We cain't set here all night reachin' fer the moon with nothin' to ketch holt of."

"You'd better keep reaching." The speaker sounded worried, uncertain. "I'm going to ride out and get your guns. Don't try any funny stuff."

"We ain't feelin' in no mood fer funniness," Sam muttered as the slim figure of a rider emerged from the dark shadow of the juniper.

Their captor was bareheaded and the moonlight was reflected from a heavy growth of tawny hair. He carried a rifle stiffly across his chest with his finger on the trigger and its muzzle trained on the two men.

As he rode closer, Sam saw that he was quite young, certainly not more than twenty, with thin, intent features. He also saw that the youthful rifleman did not wear a gun-belt and there was no evidence that he was armed with a hand-gun.

That made everything just about perfect. A rifle is plenty dangerous at ten feet, but hardly maneuverable at the close quarters that would be necessary before the youth could disarm them.

Sam relaxed in the saddle and waited patiently, with his hands still high in the air. The rider was approaching from his side. He swung around behind Sam and warned in a voice that shook with nervousness:

"Don't try to make a move, now. I've got you covered every minute. And your partner, too," he added as an afterthought.

Sam growled, "Awright, kid. I ain't studyin' aboot eatin' lead from that rifle."

The lad was close now. Sam turned his head slightly and caught a glimpse of the muzzle just below his right arm. He flailed downward with his arm, knocking the muzzle away and catching it in his hand near the front sight.

At the same moment, acting with the uncanny coordination which always prevailed between the two while in a tight spot, Ezra spurred his horse sideways and caught the slim waist of the youth in a bear-hug, lifting him clear of the saddle, panting, "Awright, Sam. I got him."

Sam gave the rifle a jerk that broke it from the youth's grasp. Helpless in Ezra's arms, the youth was sobbing with rage and frustration.

Sam dismounted and said grimly, "Drop him down here to me, Ezra. We better have us a little pow-wow."

He caught the lad by the shoulder as Ezra dropped him, demanded sternly, "What's the idee throwin' down on us like that?"

"Damn you to hell and damnation," sobbed the lad. "I've been layin' for you for more than an hour. I knew you'd be headed up Lonesome Creek. Is that where you've got Helen? Tell me the truth. Is that where she is?"

"Whoa now," Sam admonished. " 'Pears to me you've got us tangled up with a couple other fellers. Who's this Helen yo're talkin' aboot—an' what's she got to do with us?"

"Helen Higgins. As if you didn't know."

"Hear that, Ezra? I reckon this young feller can tell us some things we need tuh know. What makes you think Helen Higgins is up Lonesome Crik?" he asked the boy sharply.

"Because I think that's where the hideout is. I've been watching the last couple of weeks."

"Whose hideout?"

"The Lacy gang, of course."

"That's what we sorta thought, too." Sam shook the lad angrily. "That's why *we're* headed up there. If you

want to help this Helen Higgins, you better do some fast talkin'. What's yore name?"

"Ben Andrews. But what . . . ?"

"I'm tellin' you you've made a mistake. We're friends of Mose Higgins from up in Colorado. We don't know nothin' aboot no Lacy gang 'cept what we've heard in Santa Alicia tonight."

"Friends of Mose's?" Ben Andrews drew back from Sam. "What sort of friends?"

"The sort that don't want to see Mose in no trouble," Sam growled. "Where's he at?"

"Mose? He's . . . he's dead," young Andrews quivered. "A two-gun saddle-poke rode in from the north tonight and killed him. His gang rescued him and carried off Helen while he was on his way to jail. I've been waiting here . . ."

He was interrupted by a volley of gunshots far up Lonesome Creek. The racketing echoes thundered down to the trio between the steep walls of the gulch.

Sam s hard hand tightened mercilessly on the boy's shoulder. "If yo're tellin' the truth . . . mebby that's Pat Stevens up there now."

"I'm telling the truth, but . . ."

"In which case, we got some ridin' to do." Sam sprang away from young Andrews toward his horse. He picked up the rifle and thrust it into the youngster's hands. "Come along with us if you want a shot at the gang."

The young puncher hesitated for a moment. The first volley of shots up the creek had settled down to a steady crackling now. Sam and Ezra were both in the saddle and spurring away, without a backward glance for him. He made up his mind suddenly and swung into the saddle to join them. At least there was the promise of definite action by following them up Lonesome Creek.

10

As Pat Stevens backed away from the log cabin, he supported the limp body of Helen Higgins with his uninjured arm while he held his commandeered six-gun tight against his side with his right hand. His arm and chest were a flaming mass of pain, but the terrible necessity of the situation kept him on his feet and moving slowly backward toward the corral.

He had to get Helen out ot the hands of the gang. That was the only thing that mattered now. Through a horrible series of mistakes, he was responsible for her presence in the gang's hideout.

The lantern hanging outside the cabin lighted the door clearly, and when Pat and the girl were less than fifty feet away he saw it swing open a cautious crack.

He pressed the trigger of his gun and was grimly surprised to see a bullet knock a wooden splinter from the edge of the door. He could still shoot, by God, wounded and shaky as he was.

The men inside the cabin jerked the door shut when his bullet showed them he was still in command of the situation outside. The echoes of the single shot were still racketing back and forth between the sheer walls of the gulch when Helen stirred in the circle of his left arm.

He continued to back away from the cabin slowly, counseling the girl, "Take it easy, now. Everything's going to be all right if you leave it to me."

"If I leave it to you?" Helen's voice held biting scorn. "I was safer inside with all those men than outside here alone with you."

"That's where yo're making a bad mistake," Pat told her quietly. "If you'll help me get a couple of hawses saddled . . . "

"Help you?" She shrank away from him again, sud-

denly began wriggling and twisting to be free. "After you killed my father?"

Pat's left arm held her like an encircling iron band. He spoke harshly to jar her out of incipient hysteria, "Haven't you figured yet that I couldn't of killed yore dad? It's a good hour's ride to this cabin from yore ranch. How the devil do you think I carried him here an' then got back to the ranch for you to shoot me fifteen minutes after he went out and got shot?" He shook her violently. "Get it through yore head that I didn't kill Mose Higgins."

"That's right," she said wonderingly. "It *is* a good hour's ride to this cabin. Then . . . you couldn't have done it? Perhaps you were telling the truth all the time. But," she faltered, "those men think so, too. They took you away from Clarence by force to save you from going to jail. You're one of the gang that was after dad."

"Sure, they think so. You an' that Clarence told 'em so, didn't you? Remember back to what happened. They knew someone was goin' after Mose tonight. They didn't know who. But when we came ridin' along and you an' Clarence spilled yore story . . . well, they figured I was the guy they were expecting."

They were at the bars of the corral now. A wave of weakness assailed Pat. His left arm slid away from the girl's waist. He groped to the corral fence for support, got hold of a rail and clung to it desperately while he kept his gaze glued to the front door of the cabin, his gun leveled and ready to fire at the slightest indication of action from those cooped up inside.

Helen stepped away from him. She hesitated, poised on the verge of flight, looking him up and down queerly. There was something splendid and pathetic, something tragically glorious in the sight of his tall body sagging with pain and the loss of blood, yet

standing alone against those inside the cabin to cover the escape.

Helen hesitated only an instant before something happened to her in the vicinity of her heart. She felt a great flooding sensation of relief, of newborn hope. From the first she had been queerly drawn to this tall, quiet stranger, and had forced herself to fight against the feeling.

She ceased fighting now. Perhaps he was telling the truth. She desperately needed to believe in something, in someone. She moved close to Pat and there was a strange radiance on her face which not even the shadow cast by the canyon wall could hide. Her voice was husky with emotion as she pressed against him.

"I've got to believe you. I'm going to make myself believe you. If you want to put your arm around me again . . . "

Her voice was an invitation. Pat turned his head and saw that her young lips were parted, very close to his. He set his teeth together tightly and turned back to keep his watch on the cabin door. He continued to hold himself erect with his left hand gripping the fence rail.

"I don't," he told her gently. "I want to get you out of this mess in one piece. Don't forget . . . there's young Clarence waiting for you back in town." It was funny, Pat was thinking in a queer, impersonal way, how death and love were always so inextricably mingled. He had seen it happen so often in the past—passion blazing in the face of danger. He didn't realize it was a demand of nature upon the human race—to seize the last moment of living for love before it was too late. All he knew was that, if he wasn't a married man, if Sally and Dock weren't waiting for him back in Powder Valley, he'd forget everything else and put his arms

around the girl. It didn't matter that he was older than she. Nothing mattered except . . .

But there was Sally back in Powder Valley.

Helen waited, pressing close to him, her quivering young bosom warm against his body. She didn't understand it any more than Pat did. All she knew was that she wanted desperately to make up to him for what had happened tonight.

The flame died in her breast after a moment while Pat remained turned away. She drew in a great shuddering breath and asked him quietly, "What do you want me to do?"

"Can you make out to saddle up a couple of hawses while I keep my eye peeled on that door to see those varmints don't get out?"

"I think so. I'll try," Helen moved away, walking firmly to the corral gate. She was a hell of a fine girl, Pat thought to himself. Make some man a wonderful wife. Clarence? He let go of the fence with his left hand to wipe sweat from his face. No. He was pretty sure it wouldn't be Clarence. And he felt strangely relieved. Somehow, he didn't like the thought of her being married to Clarence.

Seemed to him that the cabin door moved slightly. Might be a trick of his vision. He wasn't seeing very clearly. He fired at the door again, just for good luck. Might as well let them know he was still out there. What about the guard stationed down the creek? It was funny that he didn't come up to see what the shooting was about. But maybe he was used to a few stray shots from the gang. Maybe he had strict orders not to leave his post no matter what happened. Damn that guard anyhow. If it wasn't for him, Pat could stay here and cover the cabin door while the girl rode off safely. As it was, Pat figured their best chance

would be to mount two horses and make a break for it together. He could ride in the lead and shoot it out with the guard—make the girl follow a little behind him—

He heard Helen in the corral behind him. The horses were circling the enclosure, snorting and terrified. She would have to rope them out—no mean feat for an experienced roper in the darkness and with a bunch of strange horses.

She was a girl in a million. He could hear her talking soothingly to one horse, leading him toward the corral gate. His body was sagging lower and lower against the fence despite his best efforts to hold himself up. He wondered, vaguely, how bad he was shot. He'd never felt quite this weak before. He had to hang on. For a little time anyway. If he could just keep hold of enough strength to sit in the saddle—

He heard Helen roping out another horse. He hoped she'd be able to pick out his roan for him. He was used to that horse. It'd be easier staying in the saddle with a familiar gait underneath him.

He concentrated all his strength on staying erect and keeping his watch on the front door of the log cabin. He and the girl wouldn't have a chance to escape unless he kept Harry and the others cooped up inside until they got away.

Helen was getting the second horse saddled now. Pat hoped to God he'd have enough strength to get in the saddle and stay there until the guard was disposed of. He heard Helen opening the corral gate and leading the horses out. The men in the cabin were showing no further desire to open the door in the face of his bullets.

He turned to see the faint outline of Helen's smiling face beside him. "I managed to get your horse and, I

think your own saddle," she told him. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good . . . for the shape I'm in." Pat let go of the corral fence and felt himself getting ready to crumple. He caught hold of the girl's shoulder and leaned against her. She competently maneuvered his roan around so the left stirrup was in front of him.

Pat Stevens put everything he had into the job of getting into the saddle. The roan was patient and let him flounder upward, with Helen helping all she could. When Pat got both feet in the stirrups and his hand on the saddle horn he felt able to accomplish anything. Helen mounted swiftly beside him.

"Let's take it as slow an' easy as we can," Pat whispered hoarsely. "If they don't hear us riding away they may think I'm still here watching, and won't try to open the door."

Helen nodded without speaking. They rode past the cabin at a slow walk. It seemed to Pat he could hear the loud pounding of Helen's heart, but it might have been his own. He kept his gaze fixed on the cabin, his gun ready to throw lead, but nothing happened.

The cabin became smaller in the distance behind them. The lantern was only a faint yellow glow in the night. When they were too far away for accurate shooting, Pat spurred his roan into a trot, seeking to draw a little ahead of the girl. He didn't know how far down the creek the guard had been stationed, and he planned to be enough in the lead to take the first bullets if there was going to be shooting.

But Helen immediately spurred up alongside of him. "If there was only some way of getting up over the side of the canyon we'd be all right. Our ranch isn't more than a quarter of a mile from that cabin as the crow flies."

"Too bad we ain't crows," Pat grunted. He shook his head at the forbidding walls on either side of them. "Only way out is down, I reckon."

"How far away do you think the guard is?"

"We've got no way of knowing," Pat told her grimly. "All we can do is keep riding until we get stopped." He had a death grip on the saddle horn to hold himself in the saddle. He had wrenched his wounds in mounting and he could feel them bleeding again. "At least," he muttered, "they haven't found out we've gone and started after us. But they're sure to do it as soon as the shooting starts down this way."

Again he tried to put distance between his horse and Helen's. But the fool girl stayed beside him like a leech.

"Before it's too late," she told him swiftly, "I want you to know that . . . "

Pat heard a horse nicker ahead of them in the canyon. It was cut off suddenly, as though an alert watcher had suddenly grabbed the animal's nostrils.

He drove his spurs into the roan's flanks, sending him lunging away from Helen. A voice shouted and flame stabbed at him from the darkness ahead. He replied with his own six-gun.

The guard was firing with both hands. Pat's gun was suddenly empty. He hadn't the time nor strength to reload.

He drove the roan savagely at the spitting lances of flame in front. He felt the horse stagger beneath him, but the roan recovered and did not slacken speed.

He heard the man scream in terror and try to leap backward, but he was too late to escape the roan's flailing forefeet.

Pat's body went hurtling through space as the roan stumbled and went down. He lit on his left side with

an impact that drove the breath from his body. Dazedly, he realized that Helen had galloped up and thrown herself from the saddle.

She was leaning over him, sobbing. Her tears were like splashes of molten metal on his cheek. He tried to push her away.

"Get out of here fast," he muttered. "You'll be all right if you hurry. But the others will be coming. . . . "

"I can't leave you here. I won't."

"It's the only thing you can do," Pat argued. "I'm done for anyhow. That guard . . . he won't bother you. Get on yore hawse and ride . . . "

"No!" She jumped up and looked about her wildly. Pat watched her run to the side of his roan who lay with his neck crumpled under him, and she was tugging at the saddle.

Then she stepped back and he saw that she had pulled his carbine from its saddle-boot. She ran to her horse and leaped into the saddle. A wave of gladness swept over Pat. Everything was all right. She was going to be sensible. She still had plenty of time to escape.

But his eyes started playing tricks on him again. She wasn't escaping. It looked like she was riding back toward the cabin.

That's what she was doing. She was riding back with his bolt-action saddle-gun balanced across the pommel of her saddle.

He tried to lift his voice to yell at her, but he was all choked up. He couldn't utter a word. Faintly, from back in the direction in which Helen had ridden, he heard the rattle of sporadic firing. Then he didn't hear anything else.

11

SAM SLOAN and Ezra drove their weary horses up Lonesome Creek canyon at a killing pace as the intermittent crackle of pistol and rifle fire continued to echo down between the canyon walls. Young Ben Andrews was right on their heels, though neither of them was giving him a second thought.

Sam was a few feet ahead of his heavier companion when his horse gave a snort of terror and leaped aside from the trail. Sam checked him and leaned from the saddle, saw the dim outline of a dead horse lying on its side, and a few feet beyond was a faint blur of darkness in the trail that looked like a man's body.

Sam jumped from the saddle as Ezra and Andrews came thundering up. He wasted one close look at the dead horse and recognized Pat's favorite roan—the one Pat was riding when he left Powder Valley. He shouted this information to Ezra while he trotted on to halt beside the limp body of Pat Stevens lying on his back in the trail. Pat's face was turned up to the starlit sky and his eyes were closed. His features were as pallid as death, with a look of complete peace imprinted upon them.

Sam Sloan tugged off his hat before he dropped to his knees beside his stricken partner. He heard Ezra dismounting and clumsily coming toward him, was faintly conscious that the shooting was continuing up the canyon and that Andrews was spurring past in that direction, shouting something.

Sam didn't know what Andrews shouted. He didn't care what the youngster did, nor what the shooting was all about.

It had never before entered Sam's mind that Pat Stevens was only human and would some day die like any other man. He had simply never thought about

Pat that way. The three of them had often joked about death—as though it were something that happened to other people—as though it could never actually happen to them.

He touched his fingertips wonderingly to Pat's forehead. Yep. The flesh felt cold as ice. He struck a match as Ezra lumbered up beside him. In the flickering circle of illumination he saw Pat's disarranged clothing and the bloody bandages that Helen had applied some hours previously.

"Pat?" The single word was jerked disbelievingly from Ezra's lips as he dropped to his knees beside Sam.

Sam nodded his uncovered head somberly. The yellow light of the match flickered out between his fingertips. Big, one-eyed Ezra lifted his hand and slowly pushed off his floppy black hat. In a voice that was choked with grief, he muttered, "Musta happened while we was arguin' with the kid back yonder."

Sam said, "Yep, I reckon." He rocked back on his heels and forced his numb fingers to roll a cigarette.

Ezra asked, "What're we gonna do?" Still in that choked tone of disbelief.

Sam thumbnailed a match. When he sucked flame into the crimped end of his cigarette the yellow light showed his dark features set in harsh lines of determination.

"Ain't but one thing fer us to do," he said after a time.

"Carry *him* outta here?"

Sam shook his head slowly. He carefully dislodged a flake of tobacco from his upper lip with his tongue and spat it out on the ground. "I ain't studyin' about Pat no more. I'm concerned with the fellers that done this."

Ezra lifted his big head to listen. The rattle of fir-

ing from up the creek had dropped to desultory and sporadic outbursts. He grunted, "That Andrews kid went on up there with his rifle."

"Funny thing," Sam meditated, "there was shootin' still goin' on after I found Pat layin' here. Which means there must of been more of 'em than Pat in the fight."

"Ortn't we to get up there an' try a whack at 'em?"

"No hurry," Sam decreed calmly. "From what we've heard, there ain't no other way up the canyon. No other way out than this for them that's up there. We can set a decent while with Pat, I reckon. All we can do for him now."

"I cain't believe it, Sam," Ezra whispered shakily after a minute of silence. "I cain't get it outta my haid that Pat won't raise up an' start laughin' any minute. Be jest like him to be possumin'."

"Did you see what I saw when I struck that fust match?"

"Shore. I saw awright. But that don't make no diff'rence. Why, Pat, he . . . hell, Sam, have you thought aboot Sally an' little Dock? They're gonna take this mighty hard."

"Mighty damn hard," Sam agreed soberly.

"Sally'd want him brung back to Powder Valley," hazarded Ezra.

"I reckon so. Women are funny that way. As if it made any difference where a man lays to get slapped in the face with a shovelful of dirt."

They were both silent for a longer period. All shooting had stopped up the creek and the abrupt cessation of sound from that direction had a terrifying impact upon the two men. There was a brooding, unnatural quality about the night silence and it seemed to close down about them with a smothering effect, as

though all of nature paused momently to mourn with them the passing of their comrade.

Ezra stirred uneasily and looked at Sam in the faint glow that came and went as he stolidly sucked on his cigarette. A pebble was dislodged under his boot and it rattled down against a boulder.

Ezra shivered and said forlornly, "There's generally a bottle of whisky passed around at wakes. I'd feel more like squattin' here if I had me a drink."

"Too bad we didn't come ready to set up with a body," Sam agreed. He took a final suck on his cigarete, spun the butt away in a glowing arc to sizzle out in Lonesome Creek. He got up, muttering, "S'pose I ride up an' flush 'em out? You stay here to pick off them that get by me."

Ezra said, "I'm ridin' with you. None of 'em'll get past us both." He started to get up, hesitated, looking down at Pat Stevens' lax body.

"Reckon I ort to carry him off the trail a little . . . so's he won't get trampled on if anybody rides by?"

"*He* won't mind bein' trampled on," Sam began with a flash of his normal humor, but he checked himself awkwardly and agreed, "Yeh. I reckon you better put him up on them rocks."

Ezra got his big hands underneath Pat's body and tenderly lifted the supposed corpse in his arms.

Pat groaned and a tremor of returning consciousness coursed down the length of his body.

Ezra shuddered and almost dropped him, staring down fearfully at Pat's face. He stammered, "G-G-God damn it, S-S-Sam, mebby he don't want to be moved."

"What kind of crazy talk is that?" Sam paused on his way to his horse.

"Sounded like he said somethin' when I picked him up. I swear to God it sounded like he did. I shore

never thought Pat would be one to come back to haunt . . . "

Sam interrupted his faltering words with a sudden exclamation. He stumbled excitedly to Ezra's side and plunged his hand under Pat's shirt and jacket to the vicinity of his heart.

He shook his head, muttering, "I cain't feel no heartbeat, but I swear, Ezra, he feels sort of warm. You reckon . . . ?"

"He just give another shake," Ezra reported excitedly. "Like a snake that keeps wrigglin' after you chop his head off. But I never heard of no man doin' that."

"Lay him down here," Sam ordered roughly. He struck another match and held the flame close to one of Pat's eyelids, leaning down to observe the result intently. He emitted a wild shout when the eyelid fluttered involuntarily under the scorching heat.

"Get some water from the crik. A hatful of it."

Ezra grabbed up his hat and lumbered down to the creek. He trotted back with a hatful of water which he dumped unceremoniously in Pat's face. The unconscious man responded to this rough treatment by rolling his head sideways.

"That's the ticket," Sam cried out happily. "Douse him some more. He'll come out of it when we get his mad up."

Ezra went to the creek and returned with more cold water. Pat groaned this time and opened his eyes to stare about him wildly. He called, "Helen," in a weak voice. Then, "Helen, where are you?"

"By God, are we gonna have somethin' to tell Sally?" exulted Sam. "Does he think aboot his wife when he comes back from the daid? Hell no. Not a word aboot his own lovin' wife. It's Helen he's worried aboot."

"Shut up," Ezra ordered. He bent over Pat and said soothingly, "Take it easy, feller. It's Ezra an' Sam."

Pat murmured, "Ezra and Sam?" in an awed undertone. He shuddered and let his eyelids flutter shut again. "Then I am dead? I thought so. But I didn't know a man dreamed when he was dead."

"You ain't dead an' you ain't dreamin'." Ezra caught him by the shoulder with one huge hand and shook him violently. "It's us. Your ol' pards. We're here."

"Which proves I'm dead or dreaming," Pat said wearily. "You can't be here. This ain't Powder Valley. And you're both too old to leave the peace and quiet of the Bar ES. So that proves you can't be here. Yet I got the funny idea I'm hearin' your voices. So I must be dead or dreamin'. And I ain't asleep, so I ain't dreamin'." He sighed unhappily at this inescapable logic.

"Too old to leave the peace an' quiet of the Bar ES!" Ezra snorted to Sam. "D'yuh hear what he said, Sam? Damn if 'twouldn't serve him right if we was to ride off an' leave him layin' here."

"Jest what I was thinkin'," Sam Sloan agreed sourly. "Castin' slurs on us when *he's* the one that lays down an' quits if a bullet comes clost to him."

Pat waggled his head from side to side. "I keep hearin' voices but they don't say nothing," he complained. "Reminds me of old times when I had a couple of gun-pards named Sam and Ezra that could talk more without sayin' nothing than any two men I ever knew before. But that was years ago when they hadn't got gun-shy and weren't afraid to take the trail with a man. Them days is gone." He sighed wearily.

"That ties it," said Sam in a loud angry voice. "C'mon, Ezra. Let's leave him lay here to waller in his own blood. We'll ride back an' tell Sally how we

seen him go floatin' off on a cloud murmurin' sweet nothings in the ear of a angel named Helen."

"Helen Higgins!" Pat echoed the name sharply. He painfully raised himself to one elbow to peer upward through the night-gloom at his two disgruntled partners. "Where is she?"

"Lessee now," Sam temporized. "Did you have her in yore pocket last, Ezra, or was that me? Seems like . . . "

"Shut up your brayin', you damn fool," raged Pat. "I'm askin' you straight out . . . what happened to the girl?"

"*We* don't go sashayin' around after no gals. Not Ezra an' me. Takes a married man to . . . "

"I remember now." Pat sank back to the ground exhausted. "While you two damn fools stand around making funny jokes there's a girl gettin' herself killed up at that gang's hideout. Trying to save my life . . . that's why she grabbed my saddle-gun and rode back instead of getting away and savin' her own skin."

"Wait a minute!" Sam Sloan's voice crackled explosively. He dropped on one knee beside Pat. "Are you tellin' that straight?"

"Straight as a gun'll shoot," Pat muttered.

"Did you say Helen Higgins?"

"Yeh. Mose's girl." Pat's voice began to fade as his strength ebbed swiftly. "She's a girl to tie to, all right. She could have got away safe but she wouldn't do it. Rode back by herself . . . an' there's six of them back there at the cabin . . . " Pat's voice faded away to pathetic silence on the final words.

Sam lifted his head and glowered at Ezra. "You reckon he's plumb out of his haid?"

"I dunno. Sounds like it. Don't stand to reason no baby gal could grab up a rifle like he says an' go back to stand off six men."

"Tha's right. He did tell us back in Powder Valley that Mose Higgins had a baby girl he was comin' to fetch back home fer Sally to raise." Sam shook his head worriedly. "You reckon he was lyin' to us how old she was . . . slippin' away from Sally an' us to meet up with her?"

"Wouldn't surprise me none. Best way to find out is ride up to that cabin an' see whether Helen wears a diaper or a long skirt."

"What'll we do with him?" Sam looked down dubiously at Pat's relaxed body.

"Leave him lay here," suggested Ezra cheerfully. "I plumb sure know that no bullet ain't gonna kill Pat Stevens. He's too damn no-account."

"Guess yo're right at that. I'll roll him up on these rocks where he can lay comfortable and not get trampled if anyone rides past." Sam bent and lifted Pat, stumbled a few feet off the trail and lowered him onto a bed of rounded boulders washed up there by spring floods. He trotted back and swung into the saddle beside Ezra, grunting.

"I'm recollectin' now that the Andrews boy said somethin' about Helen Higgins bein' took up here by the gang. Said her daddy was dead."

Ezra cleared his throat as they urged their horses up the canyon trail. "I feel bad in my stummick," he admitted miserably. "You remember all that shootin' that kept goin' on while we sat around an' mourned over Pat? Must of been the gal holdin' off the gang like he said."

"And there ain't been no shooting for the last ten minutes," Sam agreed glumly. "Looks like we messed things up proper."

With these dismal forebodings, they pushed their horses up the trail as fast as the tired beasts could make the stiff climb. There was complete silence

ahead of them in the vicinity of the hideout cabin, and the shadows in the bottom of the canyon grew deeper as the perpendicular walls rose higher on each side.

They were almost upon the cabin before they realized it, because the hanging lantern had been extinguished above the door and it was merely a darker blot in the shadows, like an unwholesome growth attached to the rock wall of the canyon.

They reined up simultaneously a hundred feet from the log structure, and leaned forward to peer through the darkness at the silent cabin. Not a single ray of light showed through any of the cracks, nor was the slightest sign of life discernible to them.

They sat their horses silently for a moment, fighting back an eerie feeling of uncertainty that gripped them.

Then Ezra laughed recklessly deep in his throat and spurred his horse forward. He leaped to the ground in front of the closed door and pounded on it while Sam advanced a little more cautiously.

Ezra turned the knob and rattled it, but the door appeared to be barred on the inside. He drew back with an oath and threw his weight against it, shaking the log structure on its rock foundations.

Flame erupted in his face as he did so from the muzzles of unseen guns poked out through a wide crack in the door.

Ezra staggered back to his knees and a second vicious salvo roared out over his head.

He came crawling back to Sam with blood streaming down his cheek from a neat crease along the side of his head, and said fretfully, "I reckon there's somebody in there after all."

"I reckon mebby," Sam agreed in disgust. "You walked into that one like a lame-brained kid that

ain't had time to get dry behind the ears yet. Lucky they had their guns aimed high enough to get you in the haid, else you might of got bad hurt."

"Yep," Ezra agreed cheerfully. "That was lucky for me. Far's I'm concerned," he ended, "they can stay right inside their danged log house till they rot."

"That'd be all right . . . 'cept I reckon they've got the gal an' Ben Andrews in there with 'em."

"Why d'yuh reckon that?"

"Where else are they?" Sam gestured beyond the cabin to the blank wall of rock where the canyon dead-ended. "Looks like the end of the trail to me."

"Yeh," Ezra agreed slowly. "So, it's up to us to get 'em out, huh?"

"It's our fault they're in there," Sam reminded him. He squatted down cross-legged and began rolling a cigarette while Ezra got out a red bandanna and dabbed at the bleeding flesh wound above his right eye. He was perfectly content to let Sam Sloan take charge now. Sam was good at thinking up strategies when a frontal attack failed.

12

SAM TURNED HIS BACK to the cabin when he struck a match to his cigarette, in order to shield the flame from view of possible watchers inside the log walls. Even this precaution failed, however, because a six-gun blasted the silence behind him the moment the match flared. A bullet whammed into the ground not more than a foot away from him.

He blew out the match and cupped his hands over the glowing end of his cigarette, exhaled smoke and grunted, "Pretty good shootin'."

"Too damn good." Ezra scrunched back a couple of yards from Sam to be out of range if the shooting continued. It didn't. It was evident that the beleaguered gunmen in the cabin were old hands at this game and had no intention of wasting lead without a target to shoot at. Behind the thick log walls, they had the advantage and they knew it. With no light showing inside, there was nothing whatever for Sam and Ezra to shoot at. Backed up against the rock wall, there were only three sides of the cabin to be defended—and Pat had said there were half a dozen members of the gang inside. That added up to pretty tough odds against a direct assault.

"We might try burnin' them out," Sam suggested placidly after smoking in silence for a minute. "I reckon it'd be easy enough to slip up close an' light a fire under their tails before they knowed what we was doin'."

"Wouldn't help the boy an' gal much to burn 'em up along with the gang," Ezra demurred.

"Yo're right. I was forgettin' the boy an' gal bein' in there with 'em." Sam shrugged his shoulders and took a last drag on his cigarette. "It'll be daylight in a couple of hours."

"Yeh. Light enough for them to see us for straight shootin' if we're still hanging around outside."

"They can't get out of the canyon if we go back to where we left Pat an' wait for 'em," Sam reminded him.

"What'll be happenin' to the Higgins gal in the meantime? 'Cording to Pat, she ain't the kind that'll be happy locked up inside a cabin through the night with half a dozen outlaws."

That was something neither of them enjoyed thinking about.

"Yo're right," Sam Sloan agreed harshly. "While

we're settin' here on our butts talkin' things over, only Gawd knows what them men are doin' with Helen Higgins inside the cabin. We got to blast 'em outta there, Ezra."

"If we had us a stick of dynamite to set off under the door . . . "

"But we ain't got no stick of dynamite," Sam pointed out. "We got to think of somethin' else. I reckon I better crawl around on my belly and size things up."

Ezra stayed behind while Sam crept forward to reconnoiter the situation. This was the sort of thing Sam excelled in. He could move through the night as noiselessly as a mountain lion stalking its prey, and he had an uncanny ability to see through darkness that was impenetrable to ordinary men.

Ezra, on the other hand, was perfectly aware of his own limitations. He was the type who always stumbled at the crucial moment, who could be depended upon to step on a dry branch or dislodge a rock when absolute silence was a necessity. He was content to let Sam do the examining and the planning. His time would come when there was a plan ready to be put into execution which would make use of his enormous strength and his complete lack of fear.

On his hands and knees, Sam proceeded slowly and cautiously toward the dark cabin. When he reached the front doorstep he squatted back on his haunches and listened intently. Not a sound came from inside the log cabin. It appeared to be completely deserted, absolutely harmless. Yet he knew there were six desperate men inside waiting for the slightest sound that would indicate the position of their attackers.

Such absolute silence under those trying conditions indicated a high degree of discipline among the members of the gang. It was a battle of nerves, with time working for those cooped up inside the cabin.

After listening intently for a moment, Sam began a careful circuit of the cabin, feeling his way along the bottom logs set in a solid rock foundation.

Not a sound had reached his ears by the time he was stopped abruptly by the rock cliff in the rear. There was no room for a man's body to squeeze between the rear wall and the cliff, so Sam was forced to retrace his steps around the front of the cabin.

He was halfway along the other side when he stopped abruptly, hearing the unmistakable clink of iron against iron inside the cabin.

It was followed by a muffled oath, then a low voice demanded, "What you doin' there at the stove?"

There was another faint click, a querulous voice replying, "Don't see no need of freezing while there's plenty of dry wood. I figger on building up the fire and hetting up the coffee pot."

"Awright, but git back to yore window soon's you git the stove fired up. I don't like this thing of nothin' happenin' outside yonder. I figger they're up to somethin' an' we got to keep watch every minute."

Sam slithered away from the cabin and back to Ezra completely satisfied. Nerves were beginning to wear thin inside the cabin as constant vigilance was kept up. The girl would be fairly safe as long as her captors were kept on tiptoe to ward off an expected attack.

"Figured somethin' out?" Ezra asked in a loud whisper as Sam approached him.

"I think I've got an angle," admitted Sam. "C'mon with me an' let's prowl the corrals and barn."

"What for?" Ezra moved off by his side willingly enough.

"Find us a couple of old tow-sacks. If they don't feed their hawses oats, mebby we can cut up a saddle blanket so it'll do the trick."

"What trick?" They had reached the edge of the corrals and were feeling about on the ground for a discarded grain sack.

Sam repeated the conversation he had overheard from inside the cabin. "Which means there'll be a roarin' fire in the stove pretty soon. If we can make out to stuff up the chimney, it'll be mighty onhealthy fer them fellers inside. Smoke gets thick enough they'll come tumblin' out like rats out of a hole."

"All they got to do is put out the fire when it starts smoking," Ezra objected.

Sam snorted loudly. "How you gonna put out a wood fire when it's goin' good? Pour water on it? That'll make it smoke all the more."

"Even if it does work, it'll be jest as bad on the gal an' on Ben Andrews as the gang."

"S'pose you shut up an' let me do the brain work," Sam suggested acidly. "I thought of all them things 'way ahead of you. Won't hurt the boy an' gal to get smoked up some. Won't none of 'em stay inside long enough to get foundered on smoke. Here's an ol' sack that'll do the job good," Sam ended with satisfaction. "Now all we got to do is figger a way to get this stuffed in the chimney an' how to han'le them six men when they come bustin' out."

"You crawl up an' stuff the chimney. I'll stand by the door and take 'em one by one as they come out."

"Only trouble with that is they won't come out one by one. It ain't likely they'll be so accommodatin'. They'll come out in a bunch with six-guns spoutin' lead. You might get two or three of 'em, but even you couldn't do better'n that."

"I can try," said Ezra placidly.

"Shore, you can try, you lunk-headed ape. But tryin' ain't gonna do us no good. We got to fix it so none of 'em get away to warn them others in town."

"Might spread a wide loop over the door to catch 'em all together when they come bustin' out. There's a nice tall aspen saplin' 'bout ten feet back of the door. Bend that down with the end of the loop tied to it . . . let 'er go when they're all in the loop. Remember how we caught jack rabbits that time we was holed up in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains without nothin' else to eat?"

"By Gawd, I do believe you've pappied a idea for oncet in yore life." Sam stopped in his tracks to stare at his hulking partner in awed amazement. "Mebby you better start doin' the brain work for a change."

"Aw shucks, that ain't nothin' much. I get lotsa ideas just as good, but you never ask me what I think."

"Never knowed before that you could think. C'mon, le's take a look at that aspen tree."

They moved toward the doorway cautiously, stopped beside a smooth-trunked aspen approximately ten inches in diameter at the base.

Sam nodded approvingly as he caressed the smooth tree. He whispered, "This'll do the job slick if we can get her bent down far enough at the top."

Ezra suggested, sotto voce, "Mebbe I could climb up an' bend her down. Drop a rope to the ground so you could tie her tight . . . "

Sam shook his head. "I knowed you'd shot yore wad when you got one idea. You ain't heavy as six men. Farthest yore weight would bend her wouldn't be enough to jerk all six off the ground at one time." He stepped back with his hands on his hips to study the situation. He mused, "If we could get a rope tied up there where the branches start, then loop it around something solid on the ground to act like a pulley, then tie the other end around a saddlehorn . . . we could get pressure on it that way

to stretch the top all the way down . . . "

Sam's voice trailed off as he moved aside swiftly to inspect an old pine stump twenty feet from the base of the aspen. Ezra waited patiently for Sam to figure it out. He had never yet known Sam to fail.

Sam came back and drew him toward the horses triumphantly. "I believe that stump will do it. Tie a short loop of tie-rope around it an' run one lariat through the loop and up to the lower branches of the aspen. That'll give us leverage when we put a hawse on the other end of the rope."

Ezra understood only dimly about leverages and such, but he was perfectly willing to be shown by Sam. They took both their coiled forty-foot lariats from their saddles, and Sam cut off a five-foot length from his which he tied securely around the base of the stump, leaving a small loop above the stump through which he threaded the uncut lariat. He then took the coiled rope over his arm and approached the aspen, started climbing it with the agility of a monkey while Ezra sat on the stump and watched him go up.

An occasional spark could now be seen drifting upward in the darkness from the cabin chimney, indicating that a blazing fire was going in the stove inside, and the time was fast approaching when their plan would have to be put in execution.

After attaching one end of the lariat firmly to the aspen trunk some twenty feet from the ground, Sam slid back to earth and brought the slack to the stump where he drew it through the rope loop that was to serve as a ground-pulley.

Ezra understood his plan suddenly and without further explanation. By putting pressure on the free end of the rope, it would be drawn through the loop at the stump, forcing the aspen trunk downward in the form of a bow.

He trotted to his horse and mounted, rode back close enough to the stump to knot the loose end about his saddle horn.

"Take it easy," Sam directed in a low tone. "I'll stay here at the stump an' tell you when she's pulled down low enough. Then, when you slack off, I'll tie her so she can't go back."

Ezra turned his horse away and let him into the pull gradually. The animal was trained to keep a tight rope from the saddle horn to a thrown steer, and as soon as he felt pressure on the girth he leaned into the job like a willing draft horse leans into the collar.

The aspen creaked protestingly as the trunk was inexorably bent earthward, and Ezra chuckled to himself as he envisioned the worried guesswork of the men inside the cabin as they listened to the queer sound.

They wouldn't know what the hell was coming off, he thought happily. Unable to see anything, they could only stay behind the barred door and wait.

His horse was straining and panting, digging into the ground for a foothold as the strain on the rope became greater and greater. Ezra could hear the girth and latigo straps creaking protestingly under him, and he momentarily expected something to give way as he strained his ears for Sam's command to stop.

It came at last, a low-voiced, "Whoa," from the darkness behind him. He spoke quietly to his straining horse, eased back gently until he felt the pressure give way as Sam got the knot made fast at the stump.

Ezra swung off and strode back to join Sam, grinning widely. The aspen was bent almost to the ground in a perfect arc, held in that position by the rope tied to the stump. The rope twanged like a tight guy wire when he touched it with his fingers. Sam was

busy laying out a large loop of the other rope and measuring the length that would allow the loop to be suspended over the door-frame with the other end tied to the bowed aspen.

When everything was in readiness, a perfect trap was set with a loop hung over the doorway waist-high where it was sure to encircle the members of the gang as they rushed out, and the other end attached to the top of the aspen so it would be jerked high in the air the moment the sustaining rope was cut.

"Neat a job as we ever did on a rabbit trap," Sam exulted as he dropped down to the stump to rest a moment before going on with his part of the plan. "You set right here with yore knife out and ready to cut the rope. Let 'em hit that loop solid, an' try to get 'em all in it before you cut the rope to jerk them up. If it does miss one or two, I reckon you can handle them."

"I'll take care of this end," Ezra promised. "You get that chimney stuffed up tight."

Sam nodded and slipped away into the darkness as silent as a ghost. Ezra got out his pocket-knife and opened the long blade, testing its keenness with the calloused ball of his thumb. It was sharp enough to shave a man. The slightest pressure of the blade against the rope would sever the straining fibers.

Ezra crossed his knees comfortably and waited for something to happen. There were quite a number of sparks flying out of the chimney now. He couldn't see anything of Sam, and he couldn't hear a sound, but all at once the sparks stopped coming out of the chimney. He knew Sam must have scaled the cliff and gotten on the roof and was stuffing his sack down the chimney.

Ezra tensed and gently laid the edge of his knife

on top of the rope. One downward slash would suffice. He wondered how long it would take to smoke the men out.

Sweat stood on his forehead as his single eye was fixed unwaveringly on the front door. It was up to him to do his part just right. A moment too soon would spring the trap before all were in the noose. A moment too late would allow some of them to duck out of the loop before it tightened and jerked them off their feet to dangle helplessly in the air.

Nothing happened. No sparks had come from the chimney for a long time. At least ten minutes, it seemed to Ezra.

Then he began to hear angry sounds emanating from the hitherto silent cabin. The smoke must be getting thick. He heard a loud banging and knew they must be trying to open the wooden window shutters.

He worried about that for a moment. Would that allow enough smoke to escape so they could stay inside without smothering. They might be hanging their heads out the windows.

He drew his gun and blasted a shot at one of the windows just to discourage any such action. The infuriated shouts inside the cabin grew louder.

Sounded like they were fighting among themselves. Might be their leader urging them to stay inside and swallow smoke. The banging of iron stove lids was added to the general uproar. That would be some fool trying to put out the fire, Ezra judged. If he doused it with water the smoke would immediately get worse.

Then there was sudden silence. Almost like they had all died at once. The silence endured for a full two minutes.

The front door was suddenly slammed open and

men came tumbling out. The first ones surged into the lower edge of the loop and pulled it away from the door frame.

It was too dark for Ezra to see if all were caught in the trap, but he took a chance and slashed the rope. The released aspen trunk "zanged" loudly as it leaped free and righted itself. A great frightened shout went up from the six men caught in the loop and jerked upward from the ground.

Ezra trotted forward with drawn gun, a wolfish grin drawing his lips away from his teeth. Sam dashed around the corner of the house to join him as Ezra stood on tiptoe and began mercilessly pistol-whipping the screaming and helpless men swinging in a great mass six feet above the ground.

Sam jumped into the unequal fray with his own long-barreled .45 and in a few moments it was all over. The six gunmen were thoroughly beaten and helpless, and when Sam cut them down Ezra pounced upon those who were still conscious and swiftly trussed their arms behind them, laying them aside in a row like six-foot lengths of stovewood—and with no more fight left in them than in the same number of fireplace logs.

While Ezra was efficiently finishing up, Sam dashed inside the cabin, muttering, "I stayed on the roof till they came out and unstopped the chimney. I reckon it's cleared enough to look for Andrews and the Higgins gal."

Ezra had finished tying up the members of the gang and was just straightening up when Sam came trotting back with the astonishing and unwelcome news that he had been unable to find any trace of either the boy or girl.

"They ain't inside that cabin," Sam panted.

Ezra said, "The hell you say," and sat down on the

ground suddenly. All that worry about rescuing the pair—and now they had vanished. What the hell was the use of trying to help people that weren't where they ought to be?

13

SAM SLOAN walked over and stared down at the trussed-up members of the gang. Two of them were still conscious but the other four were completely knocked out.

"What'd you do with 'em?" Sam demanded of the two conscious men.

One of them was the leader whom Pat knew as Harry. He spit blood and profanity out in answer to Sam's question. "Who the hell you talking about?"

"You know who I'm talkin' aboot." Sam's voice crackled dangerously. "The Higgins gal an' that young feller named Ben Andrews that rode up here to he'p her."

"Don' know nothing about no Ben Andrews."

"What aboot the gal?"

"Ain't seen her since she was dragged outta the cabin by that crazy galoot that was all shot to pieces. Hunt *him* up an' ast him what he did with her."

"He means Pat, I reckon," Ezra put in interestedly

"Yeh. And I reckon he's lyin' too," Sam grunted. "Pat says the gal come back . . an' we know Andrews rode this way."

Harry grunted malevolently from his prone position on the ground. "I swear we don't know nothin'. None of us have got ten feet from the cabin since that tall feller and the gal walked out on us. Heard some shootin' down the creek a ways. What was that?"

"That was jest the tall guy gettin' himself shot up some more," Sam told him cryptically. "What happened up here after that?"

"We made a break fer the outside soon as we heard the shootin' an' figgered the door wasn't covered no more. But there was a rider hellin' back from down yonder, slingin' hot lead from a rifle. We got back inside, not knowin' how many there was nor what was happening. Hell," Harry ended querulously, "this here Lonesome Creek is gonna have to change its name after tonight. More shootin' here than in Tombstone, Arizony, on pay night. Where do you two rannies stack up in the deal?"

"We're asking the questions," Sam told him harshly. He stepped back, warning Ezra over his shoulder, "I'll look around an' see can he be tellin' the truth. We know they didn't go back down the crik. Don't look like they could get out of here less'n they sprouted wings and flew." He strode away toward the blank wall of the canyon not more than a hundred feet up from the cabin.

Ezra lounged forward and nudged each of the six men with the toe of his boot. Only Harry and one other responded to show they were conscious. Ezra figured the other four were dead or close to it and wouldn't be making any trouble for some time. He got each of the conscious men under one arm and dragged them up over the threshold into the cabin where Sam had lit a lamp on the table.

The interior of the room was still heavy with acrid wood smoke, but it was beginning to clear away a little. Ezra dropped his two captives in the middle of the floor and made a survey of the cabin to satisfy his own curiosity. The only other occupant was the stiff corpse of an old man in one corner whom Ezra surmised was Mose Higgins. There wasn't a single sign

to indicate that Andrews or the girl had been inside the cabin.

Sam Sloan came stalking in as Ezra completed his circuit of the interior. Sam's dark features wore an awed look of utter disbelief. "Not a sign of 'em," he reported. "No hawses . . . no nothin'. But we *know* they didn't go back down the trail."

"To hell with wondering about them right now," said Ezra. "Seems to me like the fust thing is to get Pat up here an' see how bad he's hurt. Then we can go to work on these two fellers an' sweat some truth out of 'em."

Sam offered, "I'll stay here while you go down for Pat," and Ezra went outside into the night. He mounted his horse and led Sam's along to pack Pat back on, proceeded at a brisk trot down the trail to the point where Pat had encountered the outlaw guard.

He found Pat still lying on the rocks where Sam had laid him, but his Powder Valley partner was conscious now. He weakly lifted himself on one elbow as Ezra approached, then sank back with a low sigh of relief when he recognized the one-eyed man's gargantuan figure.

"Figured you'd be back," he murmured. "Heard the shooting an' all. Is the Higgins girl all right?"

"Jest you rest back an' take it easy," Ezra soothed the wounded man. "We cleaned them varmints out of the cabin an' we're settin' up housekeepin' there. Thought you'd do the cookin' fer us."

"It's no wonder you'd think of that first thing," Pat responded with a flash of his normal humor, "if those flapjacks of Sam's I ate at the ranch Sunday mornin' are a fair sample of the victuals you and him have been insulting your stomachs with."

"Sam's flapjacks do come out of the pan sorta flat an' discouraged lookin'," Ezra agreed. "If I lift you

up an' carry you to a saddled hawse, you reckon you can make it to ride back up the crik?"

"I can try, but I ain't guaranteeing results. You better ride behind and pick me up every time I fall off. Take it slow an' easy lifting me," Pat cautioned between set teeth. "I've bled so much now that my heart ain't got much blood to work on."

Ezra laughed and said, "You always did have too much hot blood fer a range-bred critter," but his big hands were as gentle as a woman's as he carefully eased Pat up into his arms and carried him lightly back to the horses waiting in the trail.

"This ain't . . . my roan," Pat protested weakly when Ezra placed him in the saddle. He wavered there, supporting himself on Ezra's shoulder while he tried to find the stirrups that were much too short for his long legs.

"Nope. I brought Sam's hawse down fer you to ride back. Can you balance yoreself while I let out the stirrups?"

Pat nodded, getting both hands on the saddle horn to keep himself erect while Ezra swiftly and efficiently let out the stirrup straps.

"I reckon," Pat said hesitantly, "that roan of mine . . . ?" He let the sentence trail off into a question mark.

"Yep," Ezra told him cheerfully. "You won't be bothered ridin' that old hunk of crowbait no more. We'll fix you up with a good hawse when we get you back to the Bar ES. We got a couple of woreout bangtails that'll jest about suit a crippled ol' man like you." He stepped back, eyeing Pat critically. "Them stirrups all right now?"

"I guess so. No feelin' in my feet, so I can't hardly tell. You lead the way and I'll follow."

Ezra was on the point of swinging into the saddle

when he stopped and cocked his head inquiringly down the canyon. He listened a moment, then asked, "You hear what I think I hear?"

"How the hell do I know what you think you hear? There's a pounding in my ears if that's what you mean."

"There's a hawse comin'," Ezra announced briefly. "Doggoned if we ain't havin' more company. That'll be Adams, I reckon . . . or Scarface. He led his horse back into the concealment of a clump of juniper by the side of the trail, and Pat touched his mount with a spur to make him follow.

"You stay right here with the two hawses," Ezra ordered him hoarsely. "I'll take this feller without any shooting, if I'm lucky."

He slipped away through the stand of juniper to a point of high rocks overlooking the trail just below the bend where Pat's roan and the dead outlaw guard lay, and squatted there on the edge of the rocks ten feet above the trail.

The hoofbeats of the approaching horse were loud now in the stillness. The rider was coming at a trot, evidently familiar with the trail and totally without fear of an ambuscade.

Ezra waited placidly, crouched there atop the rocks like a huge gorilla until the horse and rider came into view. If the rider glanced up and saw him he must have thought Ezra was a part of the rock formation, for he continued up the trail without hesitation until he was directly beneath the poised man from Powder Valley.

Then he must have thought he was caught in a landslide as Ezra's body struck him with crushing force. The terrific impact smashed him from the saddle. His frightened horse leaped forward, then docilely

slowed and halted as the reins dropped to the ground and he stepped on one of them.

Ezra hit the ground on top of the bulky figure of the rider. He felt the man go limp under him as the breath was crushed from his body by Ezra's weight.

Ezra got up and lifted the man with one hand encircling his throat. His prisoner was Deputy Sheriff Clarence Adams, limp as a rag doll in Ezra's hands. He plucked the young deputy's gun from his holster, stuck it under his belt and strode forward to throw Adams' body across his own saddle like a sack of flour. Using the deputy's coiled lariat, he passed a rope under the horse's belly, bound his hands and feet together in that manner, then caught up the horse's reins and led him to the juniper thicket where Pat waited for him.

"Got another one," Ezra said stolidly. "Adds up to seven altogether." He swung into the saddle and started up the trail, leading the deputy's horse. Pat sat in the saddle with his reins loosely knotted on his horse's neck and let the animal follow while he set himself to the task of remaining conscious and in the saddle until they reached the cabin.

Ezra hallooed cheerfully when they reached their destination. The cabin door opened immediately, and Sam Sloan came trotting out. "Did you get him all right?"

"Which one?" Ezra grunted, stepping down and ground-tying both horses.

Sam didn't hear the remark. He stepped past Sam with an exclamation of horror at the sight of an apparently lifeless man lying belly-down across the saddle of the led horse. "Is Pat . . . is he . . . bad off?" he asked shakily.

"Not near as bad off as this feller," Ezra told him

cheerfully. "You better give him a hand while I untie this yahoo and see can I wake him up."

Not until then did Sam see the third horse and realize that the limp figure across the saddle was not Pat. He stepped on to Pat without asking Ezra any questions and asked anxiously, "You all right, feller?"

"Pretty good, considering the shape I'm in," Pat assured him hollowly. "Look out. I'm comin' down." He let go of the saddle-horn and swayed sideways. Sam caught him under the arm-pits as he came down. He held him upright and Pat leaned against him, then got an arm over the smaller man's shoulders.

Ezra had his prisoner untied and was enthusiastically slapping consciousness back into him with heavy, open-handed blows on the cheek.

As Pat limped toward the door supported by Sam, he stared in surprise at the four unconscious members of the gang stretched out on the ground. "Looks like you and Ezra have been doin' some wholesale slaughter."

"Some of 'em are daid . . . some ain't quite," Sam told him cheerfully. "Here's two more inside the cabin that are pinin' to meet up with you." He helped Pat over the threshold, guided him to a chair into which Pat collapsed. His lips twisted into a grin when he saw Harry's bloodshot eyes glaring at him.

"Didn't know we were going to meet again so soon," Pat told the gang leader. "An' you not in quite as good shape as you were last time I saw you."

Harry cursed him profanely and at great length without repeating himself. He ended by growling, "What the blankety-blank is this all about? What kinda game are you playing with this feller and that one-eyed skunk. Jim Lacy ain't gonna like this a-tall."

Pat waggled his head from side to side. "That's a matter I'd like to take up with Lacy himself."

"You'll mebby have the chance before you think. Wouldn't surprise me none if he come out here tonight. I've got word he's around clost."

"Mebby this is him comin' now," Sam hazarded as Ezra's bulky body filled the doorway momentarily. He was dragging Clarence Adams behind him and his disfigured face was contorted with anger. He dropped Adams on the floor and heeled the door shut, announcing loudly, "Bit me on the hand when I slapped him. Like a locoed coyote, by Gawd." He held one hamlike hand up to show blood dripping from it. "You reckon I'll get lockjaw or somethin'?"

Adams stirred and sat up groggily, looked about the interior of the cabin with an expression of cowed consternation on his sullenly handsome face.

Pat blinked at him and then looked again. He frowned and said, "Hell, you've made a bad mistake, Ezra. This here's the deputy sheriff that was takin' me to jail when the gang broke up his party. You see, *they* thought I was working with them . . . that I'd killed old Mose Higgins."

"That's right," Adams broke in angrily. "I'm riding out here on official business . " He broke off with an exclamation of astonishment and chagrin when he looked up and saw Ezra's face for the first time in the lighted cabin, with the big man's red-rimmed single eye glaring down at him. He paused and gulped hard, then choked out, "Why hell, you're . . you're one of the men that was in the saloon in Santa Alicia. There couldn't be *two* faces as ugly as yours in the State of New Mexico at one time."

Ezra nodded grimly. "Thankin' you fer the compliment, yo're plumb right. I'm one of the innercent strangers you an' your gun-pal jumped tonight fer no reason at all."

"An'," drawled Sam Sloan, lounging forward so the

young deputy could also see him clearly, "I'm the other one that mighty nigh swallered a hunk of Scarface's lead. What you got to say aboot that?"

"Why I . . . I don't see how you got here," stammered Clarence. "Posses are scouring the whole country for you. You were afoot . . . "

"We were afoot until we moseyed back into town an' saddled out our hawses," Sam amended grimly. "What we wanta know is why the law welcomes strangers into Santa Alicia by shootin' before they ask questions."

"Well . . . uh . . . you looked like dangerous characters to me," gulped the young deputy. "The way you acted there in the dance hall. . ."

"An' the fact that we made the mistake of askin' the bartender where at we could find Mose Higgins," Sam finished grimly for him.

"Well, uh . . ." Clarence seemed to be having difficulty with his vocal cords. He darted a harassed glance at the trussed-up figures of Harry and his companion, then looked back at Pat Stevens for a long, troubled moment. It was evident that the young man was desperately trying to add things up to the correct answer, that he was trying to figure out just where each of the men stood and what sort of a mess he had gotten into.

In the meantime, after Sam had mentioned the fact that he and Ezra had come to Santa Alicia asking for Mose Higgins, Harry began doing some fast thinking. Before Clarence could speak again, Harry growled at Sam:

"Lookin' fer Higgins, were you? Mebby there's bin a lot of mistakes made all the way around tonight. What did you fellers want with Mose?"

"That's what I want to know, too," Clarence put in sullenly.

While this colloquy was going on, Pat Stevens' face took on more and more a look of complete bewilderment. He said sharply, "All three of us are old friends of Mose's. We dropped in to visit him, and we don't know what any of this hullaballoo is about."

"And, being so friendly with him, the first thing you did was to kill him?" asked Clarence sarcastically, gesturing toward the corpse of Higgins huddled in the corner.

"That's all wrong," Pat declared. 'It was like I told you and the girl at the ranch. There was some shootin' before I got there an' then *she* plugged me . . . thinkin' I'd killed her daddy. And that brings something else to mind," he went on, turning his attention to Sam. "Where is Helen now? Ezra said she was all right."

"I didn't say nothin' like that," Ezra disclaimed quickly. "I said we'd cleaned up the gang here at the cabin."

"Where the hell is she then?" Pat demanded. "Why're you making a mystery about her?"

"That's what I want to know," Clarence chimed in. "That's why I rode out here tonight . . to rescue her from these outlaws that carried her off tonight."

"I think mebby this feller can tell you about her." Sam pointed to Harry "All Ezra an' me know is that we couldn't find hide nor hair of her when we rode up here. *We* thought she was inside the cabin here . . till we smoked this gang out an' found it empty. Then they claimed *they* hadn't seen her neither . but I think they're lyin'. It's time you-all come clean," he growled, advancing on Harry menacingly. "What did you do with that gal an' young feller?"

"I swear we didn't see 'em. I told you the truth the first time."

"Where are they then?"

"How do I know?" snarled Harry. "Ask him." He pointed at Pat. "*He* carried her out of here under his arm because he wanted her for hisself. He's prob'ly got her cached away somewheres out of sight so he can go back to her an' . . ."

Sam deliberately drew his foot back and kicked out three of the outlaw's front teeth before he could revile Pat further "There you are," he shrugged, turning back to the others. "Nobody's seen the gal . . . not since she left Pat an' came ridin' back with his rifle."

"Then the trail must lead on up the canyon," Pat offered.

"Nope." Sam was positive. "I looked. Nothin' but a blank rock wall in that direction. Mebby there's some path up over the side . ."

"There isn't," Clarence grumbled. "Only way to reach this cabin is up Lonesome Creek. That's why Lacy chose it for his hideout."

"Seems to me you know a lot about Lacy for a deputy sheriff," Pat snapped.

"I meant I suppose that's why he chose this cabin."

"What do you know about Lacy?" Pat flung at him.

The young man paled a trifle. He darted a worried glance at Harry and wet his lips. "Nothing much," he faltered. "No more than common gossip. Everybody in New Mexico has heard about him and his gang."

"We're not from this cussed state," said Sam shortly. "Tell us what everybody knows."

"He headquarters on the other side of the Border with his gang. No one knows just where. His gang was supposed to be broken up and scattered twenty years ago . . . after a gun battle somewhere around here with a posse that trapped his gang after they'd robbed a stage and gotten away with a Wells Fargo

shipment of gold. Most people thought Lacy was dead, but in the last few years he seems to have gotten another gang together and started out again . . . only he operates a little differently now."

"How different?" Pat snapped.

"All I know is just what people say. He's more cautious now. Plans each new coup very carefully and doesn't ride across the Border until he's all set to make a big clean-up . . . which he does maybe once a year. They say he's got members of his old gang scattered around the country where they've been living for years and pretending to be honest ranchers. They help him work out a plan for holding up an entire community, cutting the telegraph wires and terrorizing a town with systematic house-to-house looting, robbing the bank and stores, hauling everything of value across the Border where he can sell it at his leisure."

Pat snorted his disbelief at this. "Sounds like a book story. 'Twouldn't be possible for a gang to get away with that."

"Lacy has done it three times in New Mexico in the last four years," Clarence assured him earnestly. "It's all a matter of organization, of laying the proper groundwork and getting his men in key positions before the shooting starts. They say he takes months planning each coup . . . that he doesn't show his face across the border until everything is practically in readiness."

"How about it?" Sam demanded of Harry. "Is that stuff right?"

"How do I know? I never even heard of Lacy."

"Wait a minute," Pat interrupted Sam. He asked Clarence: "What did Mose Higgins have to do with Lacy?"

"I don't know for sure. No one does. Some think

he was a member of the original Lacy gang. Others think he was just a little cracked and imagining things. But for the last few months he's been going around dropping hints that Santa Alicia was in danger of a visit from Lacy. He wouldn't tell anyone *how* he knew. He refused to talk about it. But he tried to make us get a troop of United States Cavalry in here . . . all sorts of crazy stuff like that. Well, naturally, Sheriff Petrillo and I figured we could take care of things ourselves, but he kept hinting about getting help in, about some old friends of his if we wouldn't call in troops. Well, that's about all there is to it." The young deputy spread out his hands helplessly. "Naturally, when some hard-looking strangers ride into town with their guns slung low and ask for Mose Higgins it's up to the law to be suspicious of them." He glanced around at Sam and Ezra to make his meaning clear.

"He's right," Pat agreed, speaking to Sam and Ezra. "Better give him back his gun an' apologize for jumpin' him tonight."

Ezra started to protest, but Sam silenced his one-eyed partner with an eloquent look. "Shore," he drawled. "Pat's right, Ezra. Give the deppity back his gun, an' we'll figger out a right nice apology after we have time to think it over."

Clarence Adams thanked them gruffly and got to his feet with a look of determination on his heavy features. "I'm going to look for Helen Higgins," he announced. "We're practically engaged to be married, and I'm mighty worried about her."

"Go ahaid an' do that," Sam Sloan urged. "We'll stay here an' get Pat patched up," but as soon as the door had closed behind the young man, he snapped at Ezra, "You stay here with Pat an' these other

yahoos. I'm gonna Injun after that feller an' see what's what. You can tell Pat what we overheard under them cottonwoods tonight, Ezra. I'll be back soon's I find out somethin'."

He eased out the door silently and his wiry body immediately blended with the night shadows so that it was impossible to distinguish his movements. Not more than fifty feet away, Clarence Adams was mounting his horse and preparing to ride away, completely unaware that he was being followed by the shrewdest stalker in the Southwest.

14

SAM SLOAN pressed himself back against the wall of the cabin and watched Clarence Adams swing into the saddle. It was lucky he had been able to shut Ezra up back in the cabin to keep Clarence from finding out that his conversation with Jeff Caudry had been overheard by the two Powder Valley men.

The young man must be congratulating himself on having pulled the wool over everybody's eyes, Sam thought. It was a nice set-up—him being a deputy sheriff and also a member of the Lacy gang. That was what he meant by careful planning and putting members of the gang in key positions before the shooting started. No wonder the Lacy gang could clean up whole communities and escape unscathed if they had the law all sewed up beforehand.

Clarence Adams was hesitating, glancing back toward the cabin to assure himself he was not being watched. Sam remained frozen against the log wall and it was impossible for Clarence to see him. Ap-

parently satisfied that his story had been accepted and that he was to be permitted to ride away unobserved, the deputy wheeled his horse away.

Sam couldn't repress a start of astonishment when he saw the direction Clarence was taking. He was heading *up* the canyon, instead of down the back trail. Directly toward that blank wall of solid rock that blocked the canyon not more than a hundred feet away.

Sam held his position against the wall, not daring to move because he figured Clarence was just making a feint in that direction and would immediately ride back to see if he was being watched.

Sam kept his eyes glued on the shadowy figure of horse and rider as they approached the blank wall. It was that period of intense darkness that always precedes the first light of dawn, and as Clarence rode farther away it became more and more difficult for even Sam's night-seeing eyes to distinguish him from the black backdrop of rock toward which he rode.

But Sam waited quietly, refusing to be drawn off-guard. Clarence would *have* to ride back, and that would be time enough to start following him.

Sam blinked his eyes and strained to see through the enveloping darkness. He thought he saw Clarence, and then, abruptly, he didn't. He waited for him to reappear, tensing against the wall.

He continued to wait, and could still see nothing. The sound of hooves against rocks had stopped also. It seemed to Sam that the ghostly echo of hoofbeats still lingered in the oppressive silence, but that, too, faded away. He continued to wait, growing more nervous as each second slid by. What was the young deputy up to? Had he dismounted up there after fading from sight? Was he planning to slip back and make a

desperate one-man effort to rescue the members of the gang from their captors?

Sam still wasn't quite positive of Clarence's position in the deal. It was quite evident that Harry and the other outlaws didn't recognize him as one of them. Still, it wasn't likely that Clarence was a regular member. He had probably been roped in by Lacy just for this one job. That would explain why the others didn't recognize him. But why had Clarence let them carry off the girl if he was in love with her? Why hadn't he revealed his identity as one of them on the road to Santa Alicia when they rescued Pat, thinking *he* was a local confederate?

Sam's racing thoughts found an answer for that question almost as soon as it came to his mind. The deputy had been caught plumb in the middle. He couldn't explain to them in front of Helen without losing her respect and love. With her father just murdered by the gang, he couldn't let her know he was one of them.

But what was he up to now? Why didn't he come back afoot if that was what he planned to do? Not a sound, no faint fragment of noise, came from the blank wall of the upper canyon. It was as though the earth had swallowed up both horse and rider right before Sam's watchful eyes.

Suddenly Sam began to swear softly to himself. That was just about, by God, what had happened. For he was recalling the inexplicable disappearance of Helen and Ben Andrews under almost similar circumstances. There must be some way out of Lonesome Creek by way of the dead end. And he, like a God damned fool, had stood right there and let Clarence ride away without even trying to keep him in sight. Of all the gosh-awful fools in the state of New

Mexico, he, Sam Sloan, was certainly the goshawfulest.

He moved away from the cabin swiftly, bent almost double to attract less attention and to pick up the tracks of Clarence's horse leading up the canyon.

With uncanny skill, Sam found the set of tracks he sought, sorted them out from among a maze of other tracks and followed them with his nose close to the ground, almost like a hound dog on a hot scent. In fact, Pat and Ezra had often, in the past, accused him of following a trail with his nose when he had accomplished tracking miracles that weren't human. Sam Sloan didn't deny the charge. In fact, he wasn't quite sure that his nose didn't help him in following such a trail. It was an instinctive process and one which Sam himself couldn't explain. He simply *knew* he had the right set of tracks, and he followed them unerringly in the darkness without knowing how he was able to do so.

They led straight toward the solid rock wall. There were the tracks of other horses, too, leading in the same direction. Two other sets made not more than an hour before.

Sam was bent far over and was trotting by the time he neared the rock. The three sets of tracks led straight ahead, seemingly vanishing into the very face of the wall itself where a low, weathered spruce tree clung tenaciously to life with its roots sunk in crevices at the very base of the wall.

Sam Sloan pulled up short and stared in utter disbelief when he saw that the horse tracks disappeared around the tree which appeared to cling so closely to the rock that not even a squirrel could squirm between the two.

Sam took another step forward to the side of the spruce, then planted his hands on his hips and began cursing himself with a great deal of fluency and feel-

ing. That's what a man got for taking *any*thing for granted, by God. He had walked right past that weathered spruce not more than half an hour previously without looking behind it. Who the hell would have thought it concealed a cleft in the face of the cliff? A narrow passageway not quite as high as the top of the tree, wide enough to admit a rider and high enough so a tall man could ride into it without ducking his head, and so perfectly hidden that even in broad daylight no man could possibly guess its presence without actually sticking his face around the spruce and looking for it.

Sam took a step forward into the dark entrance and stood there listening intently. It seemed to him he could hear distant hoofbeats echoed back to him along the rocky corridor. All doubt was dispelled now. Helen Higgins and Ben Andrews had certainly ridden this way, and Clarence Adams had entered the passageway not more than ten minutes before.

Sam hesitated a moment over the knotty problem of whether to go back for his horse or to follow the deputy sheriff afoot. Pat's roan was dead and that made them short one horse. Sam had no idea where the rock passage led, nor what he would find at the other end. The chances were pretty good that he'd be a long time returning from this dangerous assignment. He decided he'd better leave his horse for the use of his wounded comrade. Besides, he could follow much more silently afoot. The rock passage made a sort of echoing chamber that would warn anyone at the other end almost as soon as a horse entered it.

Sam started forward into the utter blackness with both hands outstretched in front and slightly to each side to guide him along the rough corridor. From the feel of the rough rock walls he was positive the rift was of natural origin, the spreading apart of two strata

under the terrific pressure of an earth upheaval, leading upward at a steep angle from the bottom of the canyon in a natural tunnel that must have been there for centuries.

The air was fresh and clean, with no dampness or musty odor, indicating that both ends were open so the air could circulate freely.

Sam's heart began hammering loudly as he pushed himself forward at a slow trot along the steep incline. The width remained fairly constant, not deviating more than a foot either way from its three-foot average.

Then, suddenly, one of the walls angled sharply away from the fingertips of his outstretched hand and the angle of ascent changed to a flat surface.

Sam stopped a moment to catch his breath and decide which wall to follow. The one on his left led straight ahead while the one to the right of him fell away at a sharp angle. He went ahead slowly, feeling his way along the left wall, and after about twenty feet he discovered that the other wall converged again to form the same sort of tunnel he had followed from the bottom. Once again Sam started on his upward climb.

It was evidently a natural chamber formed by a freak of nature while the world was young and suffering from cooling pains, but Sam did not take time to explore it now. That could come later—after he had discovered where the thing came out at the top, and just what Deputy Sheriff Clarence Adams was up to.

It was an arduous climb before it ended. A good quarter of a mile from the bottom to the opening at the top, Sam calculated. He came out of the rocky corridor suddenly, and found himself at the head of a steep-walled ravine that dipped downward sharply from

the brow of a low hill. The upper end was guarded by a cluster of thorn bushes which hid the entrance fairly well, though nothing like as effectively as the lower end was concealed.

There was a faint glow of pink in the eastern sky when Sam emerged into the open air again, not enough to yet light the landscape, but a distinct forerunner of dawn. He climbed up out of the ravine to level ground and dropped down for a moment to catch his breath. A cluster of lights immediately below him and not more than two hundred yards distant caught his eye at once. They were the lighted windows of a lonely ranch house where it was unusual for lights to be burning at this pre-dawn hour. Many ranchers made a practice of arising at daylight, but Sam knew none who got up before there was light enough to see to do the chores by.

He got up after a few minutes' rest, and slowly made his way down the slope toward the lighted ranch house. A group of saddled horses were ground tied in the yard not far from the front door. Sam eased up to a lighted window, staying far enough back so he couldn't be seen from inside. Dimity curtains were looped back at the bottom of the window, leaving a small vee through which he could see inside the room.

A girl sat on the far side of the room. He couldn't make out her features clearly, but he figured she must be Helen Higgins. A tall figure was striding back and forth in front of her, talking and gesticulating. Sam recognized him at once as the cadaverous individual named Nate Leadbetter, he and Ezra had encountered in the saloon.

Sam couldn't see the other men in the room, but it was evident that a voilent argument was raging inside.

He moved around to another window which enabled him to see young Ben Andrews sitting close to Helen. The young man had his rifle balanced across his knees, and his thin face was flushed angrily while he continually ran nervous fingers through his mop of tawny hair.

Clarence Adams stood across the room from Helen and Ben on widespread legs. He, too, appeared very angry. Each time the pacing Leadbetter ceased talking, Adams started. It was as good as watching a tent show except that Sam couldn't hear what any of the actors were saying.

Things quieted down all at once. It appeared that Leadbetter and Adams had reached some agreement. The girl looked frightened, and Ben Andrews stopped mussing his hair to get both hands on his rifle as though he expected to use it at any moment.

Sam heard a rustle close behind him, and whirled in time to see a looped rope settling down about him. He drew his guns, but had time to fire only once into the half-darkness before the noose was drawn tight around him, fastening his arms close to his body. Then, simultaneously, he was struck a stunning blow above his left ear, and his own shot was echoed by a rattle of explosions inside the house as he fell into a bottomless pit of blackness.

15

As soon as the cabin door closed behind Sam Sloan, Pat asked Ezra, "What was that he meant about you two being up a cottonwood tree tonight an' hearing things?"

Ezra swiftly told Pat the story of their arrival in

Santa Alicia, the strange reaction that followed their asking the way to Mose Higgins' ranch, their encounter with Clarence Adams in the dance hall . . .

Pat interrupted him at this point in his narrative: "You mean to say Adams was just sitting around there doing nothing, instead of out hunting the kidnapped girl and Mose's murderer?"

"That's jest what I mean," growled Ezra. "Near as we found out in town, he hadn't made no report aboot what happened at Higgins' ranch tonight. Nobody said nothin' aboot the gal bein' kidnapped nor the old man bein' daid."

Pat shook his head disbelievingly. "Hell of a way for a deputy to act. Particularly when he claims to be in love with the girl. Hell, I thought he'd break his neck getting to town an' organizing posses to come after us."

"You don't know the half of it yet," Ezra told him placidly. He went on to explain how Adams had gone out and come back with the scarred-face man who packed two guns and threw down on Sam without any explanation; about the ruckus in the dance hall and their escape through the back door and their subsequent perch in the cottonwoods where they overheard the significant conversation between Jeff Caudry and Clarence, repeating it word for word as he recalled it.

Pat said, "I'll be plumb damned," when Ezra finished. "Clarence is in with the gang, huh? No wonder I didn't trust him first time I saw him. And no wonder he wanted to carry me off to jail by himself so he could finish me off on the road pretendin' I tried to escape. He must have known Mose was lookin' for me . . . must have guessed I was the one. He probably knew all along who it was that killed Mose and brought him here."

"I reckon. An' I don't see why Sam let him sneak

out of here jest now. Seems to me like we ought to of tied him up here with the rest of these outlaws." Ezra turned his one eye disapprovingly on Harry and the other member of the gang inside the cabin.

"Sam had his reason," Pat guessed. "Long as Clarence doesn't suspect we know the truth about him, he may lead Sam to something important.'

"What are we gonna do while Sam's out havin' fun?" Ezra demanded querulously. "Set here on our rumps an' twiddle our thumbs?"

"No," Pat decreed. "I think we better try to get into town an' get hold of Sheriff Petrillo. From what happened tonight, I reckon he's honest."

"Yeh, an' Clarence has got him thinkin' Sam an' me are in with Lacy," Ezra reminded him. "We'll get arrested shore as we show our noses in Santa Alicia."

"We'll have to risk that. I think I can make an honest sheriff believe me if I get a chance to talk to him. Besides," Pat went on with a wan smile, "I don't want to be the complaining sort, but I reckon a doctor wouldn't do me no harm. Not that *I* care whether I bleed to death," he went on hastily, "but you boys may need some help cleanin' out the rest of the gang and I ain't going to be much good to you dead."

Ezra leaped to his feet immediately with an exclamation of rough solicitude. "I'd forgot that you'd done gone soft so a few bullet holes might wreck your deliket constitooshun. Lemme take a look at them bandages . . ."

Pat waved him away, pulling his jacket tight about his torso. "I don't need your kind of doctorin'. I'll make out till a sawbones can patch me up right. How many live ones have we got to take in?" he ended with a glance at Harry and his companion.

"I don't rightly know. There's four more outside

. . . some dead an' some of 'em only part dead. But hell! why take any of 'em in?" Ezra exploded. "Lemme knock 'em in the head and we'll stack 'em up outside the door. We know every one of 'em's ripe for hanging."

"No," Pat demurred sharply. "It's up to us to see that those that are alive get a fair trial." He paused, then explained simply, "I wouldn't be here right now if Helen Higgins hadn't insisted I go to jail for a trial. Clarence had the same idea about me that you have about these fellows. Go outside and see how many of them are fit jail fodder."

Grumbling under his breath at the uselessness of it, Ezra went out and examined the four bound men outside. Two of them were still breathing though unconscious. The bodies of the other two were cold.

When he came back to report, Pat said, "Saddle up four hawses from out of the corral and we'll pack them to the sheriff at Santa Alicia. And throw a rig on a hawse for me if Sam rode his away."

"Sam musta follered the deputy on foot," Ezra told him. "His hawse is still standin' out here." He went out again and slammed the door shut to indicate his ill humor, strode to the corral and began roping out the first horses that came under his loop. Pat was turning soft, all right. There had been a time, and not so long ago, when Pat would have agreed that it was silly to go to so much trouble to deliver a batch of live outlaws to the sheriff. But the West was getting civilized, by God, and it grieved Ezra to see Pat getting civilized too. Coddling outlaws and carrying them into town instead of rapping them over the head and leaving them lay. It was a hell of a note!

While Ezra brooded over the unfairness of it, he swiftly roped out four horses and girthed saddles on

them. He led them to the cabin and roughly tossed the two live outlaws across the saddles, trussed them securely, then strode inside to get the other two.

Pat grinned at the black look of disgust on Ezra's face. He knew it was just a pose of Ezra's and that the big, one-eyed man wasn't half as ruthless as he pretended to be. He looked on in silence while Ezra dragged Harry and the other outlaw out by their heels, then got up and dragged his weak body outside.

Daylight showed in the sky above the high walls of the canyon, though it was still black night in the bottom. Pat painfully climbed into Sam's saddle while Ezra profanely finished the job of tying each helpless outlaw across a saddle, and in a short time the procession moved down the canyon with Pat in front leading two burdened horses and Ezra bringing up the rear with the other two.

Pat let Sam's weary horse amble along at a slow gait which gave the minimum of discomfort to his wounded body. He was feeling very little pain now. He felt numbed, almost incapable of feeling pain; and curiously light-headed. There were a lot of things he didn't understand, but he was lethargically disinclined to bother his tired brain with any questions at the moment.

He felt sure that everything would be cleared up when they reached Santa Alicia and turned their prisoners over to the sheriff. The backbone of the outlaw gang would be broken by the death and capture of these six men. And they had the deadwood on Adams and Jeff Caudry also. That would be about all the men Lacy would need for his plan, Pat surmised.

He tried to wonder about Mose Higgins and to feel sorry that the old man was dead, but it was difficult for him to work up any great curiosity or pity in that direction. He hadn't actually known Mose. There was

only that old obligation, and he had done his best to repay it. Too bad he hadn't arrived sooner, but that was the way things went.

Helen Higgins was the one who mattered now. Some of the coldness went out of Pat's body as he thought of the courageous girl who had ridden back to face the outlaw gang alone while he lay helpless in the trail. She was one in a million, all right. He was mighty glad Clarence Adams was showed up in his true colors. It had worried him all along to think of Helen being in love with the deputy.

He got to chuckling as he rode along and thought what Sally would say if he rode back to the Lazy Mare ranch with Helen Higgins and told Sally she was the little girl Mose had wanted him to look after. Still and all, maybe it wasn't so funny. Maybe that's just what he'd have to do. His obligation to Mose remained, was stronger now that Mose was dead. What would become of the orphaned girl? She couldn't be very happy around Santa Alicia, what with suspicion running high that her daddy was mixed up somehow with the Lacy gang.

He thought to himself that Sally would understand and would welcome the girl, but in his own heart he knew that what he really feared was Helen's reaction if he gave her such an invitation. That had been a close shave out by the corral tonight. He knew damn well he could have kissed the girl. And he had wanted to kiss her at that moment. That's what scared Pat Stevens. It wasn't right for a man who loved his wife to find himself wanting to kiss a strange girl. In his own heart he knew it didn't have anything to do with his love for Sally, but it scared him just the same. Suppose he discovered after he got Helen home to Powder Valley that he still wanted to kiss her? What then?

He wriggled uneasily in the saddle and tried to

change his train of thought. They were nearing the foot of the canyon now, where the walls were widening out, letting daylight onto the trail. He turned his head to look at the two outlaw horses behind him carrying their unconscious burdens, with the bulky figure of Ezra erect in the saddle behind them. The warmness inside him spread out when Ezra saw him looking back and lifted a cheery hand in greeting.

By God, Pat couldn't help thinking, this had been a good night. Just like old times, with the three of them working together as they had done so often in the past. He realized he had been a fool to come off from Powder Valley without Sam and Ezra. He might have known they would sense the sort of mission he was riding on and would follow him.

Lucky for him they had, he mused. It would have been the certain end of one Pat Stevens in that Lonesome Creek trail if they hadn't come along when they did. And he knew, now, that he had actually expected them. Though he had refused to admit it to himself, there hadn't been any doubt in his mind that they'd be there backing his play as always when the time came.

He checked his horse for Ezra to come up beside him when he reached the point where the mountain canyon widened out into the flat reaches of the New Mexico desert. The sun had not yet crawled above the flat horizon eastward, but the sky was painted with red flame and the rolling dunes of desert sand took on robes of shifting color in the morning haze.

"'Tain't far to Santa Alicia an' jail now," Ezra informed him with a wide grin when he reached his side. "Right here's where Sam an' me hit the canyon ridin' from town."

Pat nodded and put his horse to a trot. He felt curiously wide-awake and light-headed. There was a driv-

ing force inside of him that bade him hurry and get the job done. One of those old "Stevens hunches" that had stood them in good stead before.

The tired horses responded to the challenge of the new day also. They pricked their ears and lengthened their stride as they headed toward town, as though remembering the comfortable stalls and feed bins at the hotel livery stable from which they had been jerked away by their owners.

The outlines of the little town of Santa Alicia assumed unsubstantial form in front of them on the flat plain like an illusive mirage with which the desert often tantalizes men. It was wraithlike, seeming to hover above the surface of the ground, like a tiny doll's house without actual shape or form.

Then the red rim of the sun was shoved up over the horizon by a giant hand—and there was the real Santa Alicia waiting for them. A bleak and treeless collection of adobe houses squatting forlornly in the middle of nothingness, and they were upon it almost before they realized they had covered that much distance.

A few householders came to their doors and stared out at them with apathetic disinterest as they rode through the outskirts, but when they approached the village square they discovered many saddled horses and a group of hard-eyed men gathered in front of an old building with a high steeple which marked it as the local courthouse.

"You reckon we better try to duck around and find out what's what?" Ezra asked Pat nervously. "Don't be forgettin' they've got me an' Sam marked out as a couple of outlaws, and we ain't exactly anxious to be treated as sech."

"We'll ride right up and lay our cards on the table," Pat decreed. "Things have gone too far now for any-

thing to be gained by holdin' back. It's time for a showdown . . . and I've got to get myself to a doctor," he ended candidly.

Ezra shot a worried glance at him and saw that Pat's face was ashen in the morning light. He offered no more remonstrances, but rode on at Pat's side.

Big-hatted and six-gunned men turned to observe them curiously as they approached. An excited murmer swept over the armed group when they came close enough for the men to see what the led pack horses carried roped across their saddles.

Sheriff Petrillo appeared on the threshold of the courthouse as Pat and Ezra pulled up in front. The men parted on either side of the steps to let him come down. The sheriff's dark features were gaunt with weariness and his red-rimmed eyes showed the strain of a sleepless night.

His eyes lighted when he saw Ezra's huge bulk and single good eye. He came down the steps slowly with both hands resting lightly on the butts of his guns.

He spoke in his native tongue to some of the men on each side of the stairs, and they fell in beside him —with their hands on their guns also.

Ezra swung off his horse and strode forward to meet the sheriff. He carefully kept his hands away from his gun.

"I know what yo're thinkin'," he greeted the sheriff, "but you've made a bad mistake. I ain't one of the Lacy gang, no matter what you've heard."

"No?" asked the sheriff in his grave, mellow voice.

"Nope," said Ezra strongly. "This feller back here will vouch for me. I reckon you've heard of Pat Stevens from Powder Valley?"

"Pat Stevens? But yes. Who has not?" asked the sheriff politely. "Which of those with you is Pat Stevens?"

"I'll let him talk fer himself." Ezra turned with a sweeping gesture. His big hand wavered, then dropped to his side and his mouth gaped. For Pat had fallen into the dust where his horse had stopped. He lay there unmoving and lax.

Ezra shuddered and started forward, exclaiming, "Some of you give me a hand. He's hurt bad an' needs a doctor."

"Not so fast, amigo," Sheriff Petrillo warned him from behind. "I will take your gun and then we will discuss this matter."

A tall figure detached itself from the others, and Ezra caught a brief glimpse of a caustic smile twitching across the scarred face of the man he knew as Jeff Caudry.

"Don't let one-eye fool you, sheriff," Caudry warned him. "I know Pat Stevens good, an' I'm sayin' that man on the ground don't look no more like Stevens than I do."

16

In the Mose Higgins ranch house, the single shot from Sam's six-gun as he was attacked outside the window set off the dynamite that Sam had been watching build up inside.

Ben Andrews stiffened at the sound, and his finger jerked the trigger of the rifle across his knees. A steel-jacketed bullet screamed into the wall between Clarence Adams and Nate Leadbetter. Both men whirled on the young cowpuncher with drawn guns.

"That's plenty enough from you," snarled Clarence "Drop that rifle and put your hands up. You're under arrest."

"What was that shot outside the window?" Helen

demanded. "Someone has sneaked up while we've been quarreling inside here."

"Get hold of Andrews' rifle," Adams ordered Nate Leadbetter curtly. "This, I reckon, is the showdown."

Ben Andrews leaped to his feet angrily. "You can't pin any of this on me. I haven't done anything to be arrested for."

"Throwing lead at a deputy sheriff is something," Clarence retorted.

"I didn't mean that. I jumped when that gun went off outside the window."

"You'd just been threatening me," Clarence reminded him coldly.

"I said there was something mighty funny about the way you've been acting tonight," the young puncher insisted. "Looks to me like you didn't care what happened to Helen after the gang carried her off."

"I rode out to rescue her by myself," snarled Clarence.

"Yeh. After midnight. What were you doing all the time in between?"

"Nate Leadbetter's been telling you about what happened in town. Two more of the Lacy gang came in and . . ."

"Hush *up*," Helen wailed. "All this argument isn't going to prove anything. You're all acting mighty funny about that shot outside. Don't any of you care who's out there or what is happening?"

Clarence shrugged his shoulders. "I imagine that was Ned Leroy. He rode out here with Nate and stayed outside to see the gang didn't slip up on us."

There was a loud pounding on the front door as he spoke. He nodded to Nate and said, "Open up and see if that's Ned."

It was young Ned Leroy, looking frightened but triumphant as he dragged Sam Sloan inside.

"Saw this fellow snooping around outside," he panted. "I crept up on him and was just about to sock him a good one when he heard me and triggered his gun."

"By golly! it's one of them that stayed back in the hideout," Clarence exclaimed. "The little dark one that was in Santa Alicia tonight with the big one-eyed son-of-a-gun. How'd he get here so quick?"

"Trailed you up through that cut in the canyon wall you told us about," guessed Leadbetter. "Which is a place I aim to do some huntin' in pretty soon. Ned Leroy an' me."

"Now listen, we've got to get a lot of things straight," Clarence Adams insisted. "I'm arresting Ben Andrews, here, for shooting at me and on suspicion of being in with the Lacy gang."

"How can you say a thing like that about Ben?" Helen confronted the deputy with flashing eyes. "He helped me get away from Lonesome Creek."

"That's why I suspect him," Clarence told her sourly. "Because he *did* help you get away. That trail down through the rock was a secret known only to the Lacy gang. Wouldn't surprise me if they used it in their getaway that time years ago when they robbed Wells-Fargo. I don't reckon anybody knew about it all these years except them. But Ben showed it to you when you and he needed to get out of that trap."

"How did you know about it?" Ben put in angrily. "That's the way you got here too."

Clarence hesitated only a fraction of a minute, then explained glibly, "I followed the tracks of your horses. I knew you'd gotten out somehow and hadn't ridden down the canyon. Nope, Ben. Looks like you're elected as a gang member. Question is, do we shoot you here and now or waste time giving you a trial."

"I'll have something to say about that," Helen Hig-

gins put in suddenly. She stepped between Ben and Clarence, flung out her arms dramatically. "*I'm* the one you should arrest. *I* showed Ben the way out of the canyon."

"Don't, Helen," pleaded Ben. "Don't tell them anything."

But Helen stood with her chin lifted proudly and defied Clarence. "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"*You* showed him the way? I don't believe it. You're shielding Ben. You're in love with him. You always have been . . . even when you pretended to be in love with me."

"All right," Helen said slowly. "I guess maybe I have been. I've always despised you, Clarence Adams. And I let you make love to me because . . . well, for dad's sake. Because I thought it might help if he had a deputy sheriff for a son-in-law. But dad's gone now. So I don't have to pretend any longer."

Clarence's sullen features took on an angry scowl. "What are you telling us? What most of us have always suspected . . . that Mose was a Jim Lacy man?"

"*Was.* Yes. That's just it. 'Way back when they held up the Wells-Fargo stage near here. But dad quit after that. He bought this ranch and settled down to live honestly. Then, a year or so ago, Jim Lacy found out where he was and he's been pestering dad ever since. I don't know just exactly what it was about," Helen added wearily. "Dad never told me. Something about that old hold-up. I guess Lacy was threatening to expose him unless dad threw in with the gang again. And dad refused," the girl ended proudly.

"We've guessed most of that," Clarence said impatiently. "But about that passageway from the ranch down to the gang's hideout. How long have you known about that?"

"Just since tonight. Dad never told me . . . not until he . . . not until after he was dead."

"Told you about it after he was dead, did he? That sounds mighty likely."

"It's true whether you believe it or not. It was in the cabin down there." Helen shuddered and her voice faltered. Then she recovered her voice and went on: "The gang let me go over and look at dad's body. They were getting a fire built and paying no attention. And I found a folded sheet of paper in his vest pocket. It was . . . a penciled map, showing both entrances to the passage. I stuck it down my dress until I had a chance to look at it alone later. That was just before Ben came along. We had driven the gang back into the cabin, and he told me there were some other men taking care of the stranger whom I had escaped with . . . the one I shot tonight thinking he had killed dad."

"One of this fellow's partners." Clarence nudged the unconscious body of Sam Sloan with his toe. "I expect all three are in on it together. What makes you think now that the other one didn't kill your dad?"

"I know he didn't." Helen stared at him in wide-eyed amazement. "He showed me how it couldn't have been him. Finding dad's body in the cabin proved that. There wasn't time for him to take dad there and get back here when he did."

"How do you know?" snapped Clarence.

"You know it's a good hour's ride around to Lonesome Creek . . ."

"Sure, it's an hour's ride *around* to Lonesome Creek. But not down the passage from here. He had plenty of time to shoot Mose, carry him down that passage to the cabin . . . then get back here and pre-

tend to be dropping by innocently . . . which is just what he did, I'll bet."

Helen's face mirrored her confusion. "I had . . . forgotten about that . . ." she faltered. "That would have given him time, wouldn't it? But how do we know he knew about that way?"

"Well, if he was one of Lacy's men sent here to get rid of Mose because Mose was in the way . . . it's natural to suppose that he knew about it. Anyhow, that's the only answer."

"Then why did he act like he did with me?" Helen demanded. "He grabbed a gun and held them off so we could get out of the cabin. And he kept shooting at them while I saddled horses. That doesn't look like he's in with them."

Clarence's sneer became more pronounced. "Looks like you could figure out what he had in his mind. Even an innocent girl like you knows what an outlaw wants when he grabs a girl away from a bunch and carries her off by herself."

A deep flush crept into Helen's cheeks as Clarence's hideous suspicion became clear to her. She trembled, now, as she recalled that moment at the corral when she had been so attracted by Pat Stevens. Why, she had practically asked him to kiss her. But he had refused. Why? Was he merely biding his time, gaining her confidence? Her cheeks burned like fire and she hid her face with her hands, backing away from Clarence to a chair and dropping into it. After a moment, she said faintly, "I don't know . . . I guess I'm not sure of anything any more. What are you . . . going to do now?"

"We ought to go back and clean those fellows out of the cabin right away," muttered Clarence. "One of them may even be Jim Lacy, for all we know. What

do you think about it, Nate?" He looked inquiringly at the tall, cadaverous gambler.

Nate Leadbetter shook his head. "You're the law," he murmured in a sarcastic growl. "I'm not studyin' about mixing up with Lacy's gang. Not me nor Leroy neither."

Clarence hesitated, studying the tall gambler intently. "If I deputize you, you'll have to give me a hand."

Leadbetter threw back his head and laughed raspingly. "I don't try any fool stuff like that." There was the implication of a quiet warning behind his words that caused Clarence to shift his eyes uneasily.

"Then I guess I'll have to go back and try it by myself. Will you and Ned stay here to keep watch over Helen?"

Leadbetter laughed as though vastly amused. He glanced at Ned Leroy. "Hear that? Will we stay here, says he, while he goes back exploring through the passage?"

"It's a trick," Ned stated sourly. "I'm not goin' to let him do it. Not after all the trouble and risk I've taken . . ."

"You bet we won't," Leadbetter shut him up curtly. He turned to address Clarence. "We'll ride down with you as far as the other end . . . just to see you get started right. And after you ride out the other end . . . don't get any fool ideas and come back too quick. Ned and me have got a little something to do."

Clarence Adams started an angry protest. He cut it off short with a glance at Helen and Ben. He muttered, "No use arguing about things here. Let's get started."

He led the way out the door into the morning daylight. Nate and Ned followed him silently. When the door shut behind the trio, Ben Andrews turned awk-

wardly to Helen. There was an awed look on his young, sunburned features. He asked, "Did you . . . did you mean . . . ?"

Helen got to her feet. She avoided his eyes, her face slowly going crimson. "Do I have to . . . draw you a map?" she asked faintly.

Ben took a step forward. Helen swayed to meet him and they were locked in each other's arms. Neither of them said anything for a long time. Then Helen drew back from him and some of the starry radiance departed from her eyes when she saw Sam's body lying on the floor where it had been carelessly dropped by Ned Leroy.

A little cry of fear and of puzzlement escaped her lips. "We haven't even seen how badly he's hurt, Ben." She drew away and dropped to her knees beside Sam, gently feeling of a large lump on the back of his head. Sam groaned and jerked his head aside to avoid her fingers.

"Why not leave him lay there?" Ben demanded. "If he's one of the Lacy gang . . "

"I don't believe he is." Helen looked up to him with tear-dimmed eyes. "I can't believe it. If he's a friend of the tall man's, then I know he must be good."

"The one that maybe shot your dad?" Ben asked hoarsely.

A queer look of remembering softened Helen's taut features. She whispered, "He didn't shoot dad, Ben. I know he didn't."

"How do you know? Like Clarence said, he could of carried him down to the cabin . . ."

Helen said, "Clarence!" so the word sounded like an oath. "I don't believe anything he says. I think . . . Ben, I swear I think Clarence is mixed up with the gang."

Ben stared at her stupidly. "But he's . . . he's a deputy sheriff."

"What difference does that make?" Helen's eyes were sparkling again. "I believe they're all in it somehow. Clarence and Nate Leadbetter and Ned. We've got to get this man to town, Ben, and tell the sheriff. Mr. Petrillo will know what to do."

Ben said, "All right, honey. If that's what you want." He knelt beside the girl and his arm went around her shoulders, tenderly, naturally. "You reckon he's hurt bad?"

"I don't think so. Just this knock on the head." Helen touched the swelling again. Sam groaned and rolled his head over. He cocked one eye open, and when he saw Helen's face, he muttered, "Who hit me?" and "Where's Pat?"

"He's conscious," Helen cried, rising swiftly. "Help him out to his horse, Ben. We're riding to Santa Alicia . . . in a hurry."

But minutes were wasted after helping the groggy man from Powder Valley to his feet and out the door only to discover that Sam had come afoot and it would be necessary to saddle another horse for him.

So it was that the sun was poking its red rim over the horizon when the three finally left the ranch behind them and headed for Santa Alicia—just about the same time that Pat Stevens and Ezra were riding into a noose-baited trap in the same town.

17

"He's a big-mouthed liar," Ezra exclaimed angrily to the sheriff in refutation of Jeff Caudry's statement that Pat Stevens was not Pat Stevens. "He's one of

the outlaws his ownself . . . tied up with that depitty, Clarence Adams. Don't believe a word he says, Sheriff."

The sheriff frowned, shaking his head. "What do you mean . . . an outlaw mixed up with Deputy Adams?"

"I forgot you didn't know what's been goin' on. Why, shore, Sheriff. This scar-face an' Adams are in cahoots with the Lacy gang . . . four of which," Ezra ended grimly, "are tied on them led hawses there."

The crowd of armed possemen was pressing closer and closer about Ezra and Caudry, drinking in every word without understanding, knowing only that it was a drama-filled moment in their humdrum lives.

Caudry showed his teeth in a sardonic snarl. "The man is crazy," he ejaculated. "Who is going to believe such a charge? We all know Adams . . . as honest as the day is long."

He was a shrewd antagonist, shifting the attention of the crowd to Adams whom they all knew, and away from himself.

Sheriff Petrillo nodded. He muttered, "Deputy Adams is a good man. Without proof I cannot believe what you say. But this man is wounded." He strode toward Pat who lay on the ground unconscious. "While we stand here talking he may die. If he is Pat Stevens or if he is an outlaw, he must have a doctor's attention."

"That's right," Caudry grinned. "Save him to hang later." He leaned over and picked up Pat in his arms, saying, "I'll jest carry him across to the sawbones over yonder on the other side of the square."

Ezra took a step forward to stop him, bellowing, "Don't you touch Pat. Figgerin' on slippin' a knife into his ribs, I reckon . . ."

Strong hands grabbed Ezra and held him back. The

sheriff warned sharply, "Not so fast, my big one. You are one, from your description, who we hunted long tonight after the shooting here. You are under arrest until we find out what is true and what is false."

"In the meantime that Lacy outlaw will be finishin' Pat Stevens off with no one to stop him," Ezra yelled. He lunged forward, dragging half a dozen men with him, flailing out ferociously with both huge fists like a maddened bull elephant.

Men went down into the street and were trampled underfoot before the big man was finally subdued by sheer weight of numbers. When the melee was ended, Sheriff Petrillo emerged from it panting and with one sleeve of his shirt torn from his body.

"Madre mio," he muttered in awe. "This one is strong like six bulls. We will take him to the jail, and you, Thomas, go to the Doctor Drano at once to see nothing happens to the other one. This Jeff Caudry," he ended with a worried shake of his head, "is one I know not about neither."

"Lemme go to Pat," Ezra pleaded with the sheriff when order was restored and his big hands were securely trussed behind him. "Come with me to the doctor's office so I can prove he's Pat Stevens like I say. He's got papers in his pocket. 'Twon't hurt you to take a look."

The sheriff hesitated, rubbing his chin dubiously. "None of this I like so good," he conceded. "If he *is* Pat Stevens from Powder Valley like you say . . ."

"He is. I swear he is. I'm from Powder Valley too. Pat's a ol' friend of Mose Higgins. Mose writ him a letter sayin' he was in trouble an' needed help. I betcha Pat's got that very letter in his pocket right now."

"It will not be wrong to look," the sheriff agreed cautiously. "Come with me, three of you, to see this crazy man does not break his ropes and make the

wreck of Santa Alicia. We will see what this man has in his pockets."

In silence, the procession trailed across the square to a neat one-story adobe house with a polished brass sign over the door which indicated it was the domicile of Dr. Ezekial Drano, M.D.

A trim young girl answered the sheriff's knock on the door and she led them back along a corridor to the doctor's reception room and office in the rear.

Jeff Caudry and the man whom Petrillo had sent across with him were in the reception room. Caudry greeted their entrance with a sardonic smile.

"The doc's in there cutting him up now," he announced. "Reckon there won't be much left of him when the doc gets through."

Petrillo ordered Ezra's guards to remain with their prisoner in the reception room, and he went into the doctor's office alone.

Ezra stood in the center of the floor with his hands bound behind him and glared balefully at Caudry with his single eye. "Yore time's comin'," he warned the scarred-face man. "Soon's the sheriff goes through Pat's pockets an' finds out I've told the truth, yore goose will be cooked. Not many of yore gang left now as 'tis."

Caudry smiled slyly and deftly rolled a cigarette. "You've got the heft to stretch a rope nice an' tight," he mused with smoke curling up past his scarred cheek. "I'd admire to pull the other end myself."

Sheriff Petrillo came out from the doctor's office before Ezra could reply. Ezra swung toward him and asked eagerly, "How is he, Sheriff? He'll pull through I reckon."

"Pull through?" The Spanish sheriff looked surprised. Then his face cleared. "But yes. That is the American slang. He will be well quickly, but Dr.

Drano says he has lost much blood and will be weak." He paused, then added bluntly, "There was nothing in his pockets to show he is the man you say. Nothing in his pockets. No letter. No nada." He spread out his hands in a Latin gesture of indifference. "It is to the jail for you, my friend with one eye."

For a moment, Ezra stood speechless with consternation. He didn't *know* Pat had brought Mose Higgins' letter with him, but he had felt absolutely positive that Pat would have some papers of identification on his body. He started to protest, but his guards were efficiently bustling him out to the corridor and toward the front door.

As they reached the outer air they were intercepted by a tall man dressed in store clothes and wearing eyeglasses and a white goatee. He stopped them with an air of authority, demanding, "Where is the man who calls himself Pat Stevens? I must see him at once."

Petrillo pushed past the others. "Good morning, Señor Tom Leroy," he said politely. "I think the man who calls himself Pat Stevens is someone else."

"What makes you think that?" demanded the county political czar.

"He has not the papers for identification."

"Let me see him and talk to him. I can tell soon enough. Mose Higgins told me how he met him years ago. I can check up by asking him a few questions."

The sheriff spread out his hands again. "I think no one will talk to him for many hours. The doctor has put him under the gas that smells bad."

Leroy harrumphed loudly and caressed his goatee. Ezra lunged forward to confront him. "I'm Pat Stevens' pardner from Powder Valley," he said loudly. "What you want with him?"

Tom Leroy looked at him coldly. "My business was

with Mr. Stevens. Concerning a certain private document placed in my hands some months ago by Mose Higgins to be turned over to Stevens in case of Mose's death. I've heard that Mose has been murdered, so . . ." He shrugged his thin erect shoulders.

"You better give me that document," Ezra urged. "It's needed right this minute to clean the Jim Lacy gang out of this town. I'm tellin' you right now we cain't afford to lose no more time. Mebby it'll fix ever'thing right up."

"I'm very sorry," said Tom Leroy. "That's what I wanted to tell Stevens. As soon as I heard of Mose's death I went to my safe where I had the sealed envelope . . . and found it gone. Vanished. My safe has been robbed." He vented himself of a deep, troubled sigh.

At that moment a trio of riders loped up the street outside. They pulled their horses to a stop when they saw the crowd gathered on the doctor's front porch. Ezra let out a whoop of joy when he saw Sam Sloan, Helen Higgins and Ben Andrews.

He bellowed, "C'mere, Sam, an' come a-runnin'."

Sam slid off and hurried toward him, followed by Ben and Helen.

In a few words, Ezra explained his predicament to Sam while the sheriff and others stood by and let him talk, listening curiously while they sought to determine for themselves whether these two were who they claimed to be or were actually members of the dreaded Jim Lacy gang.

". . . an' this Tom Leroy here," Ezra ended angrily, "claims Mose left him a sealed envelope to be handed to Pat if he died afore Pat got here . . . but the letter's done been stole from his safe an' now nobody knows nothin'."

"Tom Leroy?" exclaimed Ben Andrews. "That's

funny. Ned Leroy was just out at the Higgins ranch . . . with Nate Leadbetter and Clarence Adams. They all went off together . . . said something about exploring the old passageway to Lonesome Creek that the Lacy gang used years ago when they were robbing stages hereabouts."

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam Sloan caught a glimpse of a figure furtively slipping away from the edge of the crowd. It was Jeff Caudry, the jagged scar on his face showing livid and ugly against a background that was white with fury.

"Hol' on there," Sam shouted. He flung himself after Caudry, was met by a snarled curse and two guns swiftly drawn against him.

Unarmed, Sam flung himself into the dust at Caudry's feet, knocking the gunman to the ground.

At the same instant, Ezra tore himself from the lax grasp of the men who held him and plowed through the throng. He launched himself through the air like a battering ram, his full weight landing atop the gunman and knocking all the fight from him.

Sam Sloan leaped to his feet and confronted the muzzles of half a dozen guns. He waved them aside, shouting angrily, "Don't be fools. You've got us two an' Pat if you want us. We don't mind. But don't you see that you're playin' into Lacy's hands if you waste time here in town?

"There's somethin' about that passageway that's important," he went on earnestly. "I don't know what it is but I aim to find out if you fellers will go with me. Don't you see how it all ties together?" he pleaded. "Helen and Ben was tellin' me on the way in aboot a argyment Nate Leadbetter and Adams was havin'. Nate an' Ned Leroy come to the ranch together. They're in on this some way. That sealed letter of Mose's disappearin' from Leroy's safe! How

about that, Mr. Leroy? How many people could get into yore safe?"

"Why . . . ah . . . ah," faltered the goateed man. "I had the combination and . . . well, and Ned . . ."

"There you are," argued Sam. "Stands to reason he grabbed the letter the minute he knowed Mose was done for. Nate put him up to it, I reckon. I done heard that you'd kicked the boy out and he'd gone sorta wild."

Leroy hung his head for a moment. "Yes," he murmured. "Ned has been hanging around with Nate Leadbetter and doing some gambling. He owes Nate a lot of money. . . ."

"There y'are," Sam pointed out triumphantly. "So Nate knowed that Mose knowed *something*, and he knowed it'd be in the letter you had put away for Mose. An' he talked yore boy into grabbin' it . . ." He stopped and made a savage gesture. "To hell with all this talkin'. We better be gettin' back to Lonesome Crik an' the ranch." He whirled and drew out a clasp-knife, slashed the bonds holding Ezra's wrists behind him, and so completely did Sam Sloan dominate the situation that no one thought to protest.

"Take Caudry's guns, some of you," snapped Sam, taking full charge now. "Ezra an' me'll go unarmed. We ain't afraid of what you'll find out. But jest to prove what I'm bettin' is true . . . Keep settin' on top of him, Ezra." He knelt beside Jeff Caudry who still writhed ineffectually beneath Ezra's weight and swiftly began going through his pockets. In a moment he stood up, triumphantly waving a sheaf of papers.

"Here's the stuff he stole outta Pat's pockets while he brung him over to the doctor's office. The letter from Mose an' everything. *Now* will you fools begin to believe what I'm tellin' you? With Caudry here, we've got the rest of the Lacy gang trapped out yon-

der in Lonesome Crik. If some of us goes up the crik and some to the ranch, we'll close in on that passageway at both ends."

In the midst of a lot of excited questioning, Sam swiftly told about the passageway between the outlaw hangout in Lonesome Creek and the Higgins ranch, and by the time he had finished he had the sheriff and entire crowd in perfect agreement with him on his plan of action.

It didn't take long for horses to gallop directly to the Higgins ranch with the main body while another party was dispatched to cover the lower end of Lonesome Creek.

Without their guns and surrounded by armed men, Sam Sloan, Ezra, and Jeff Caudry were all held as virtual hostages until the true facts of the case became known and the puzzled sheriff should definitely decide which was an outlaw and which an honest man.

When the party thundered up to the upper outlet of the passageway and Sam pointed the simple manner of concealment, the sheriff immediately ordered several of the men to gather dried stems of yucca plants to be lighted and used as torches to light the underground channel, and with Sam as a guide he led the posse on foot downward through the narrow way.

The flickering light of the yucca lighted the smooth rock walls in front of them. There was absolute silence—not a sound to indicate that Sam was correct in his belief that there was some secret here which the three men had intended to search out when they left the ranch so hurrriedly.

But when they reached the inner room about halfway between the entrances, a gruesome and bloody sight greeted the light of the torches.

The first body they came upon was that of Clarence Adams. He lay flat on his back and his sightless eyes

stared up into Sheriff Petrillo's face. He was dead with a well-placed bullet through his heart.

Ten feet beyond him was the cadaverous body of the gambler, Nate Leadbetter; a hideous sight now with half his thin face shot away.

A low moan drew the sheriff on to Ned Leroy who lay outstretched on his belly in one dim corner of the small chamber. His arms were outstretched about two heavy leather bags as though he had gathered the precious objects to his bosom as his last gesture of consciousness when he collapsed.

The sheriff gave a start of astonishment as he rolled the young man over gently. "Them're old Wells-Fargo money pouches," he muttered.

"I guessed it was somethin' like that," Sam told him. "The loot from that Lacy stage robbery. It's been cached here all these years with only Mose Higgins knowin' aboot it, I reckon. How bad's the boy hurt?"

"My son. Oh, my son," came in a sobbing quaver from stern old Tom Leroy's throat as he knelt beside the boy who had been led astray by gambling and bad companions. "If you could only speak to me, Son."

"Dad." The single syllable was a gurgle from the dying boy. He strove to open his eyes, murmured weakly, "It's awfully dark, isn't it?"

"Tell us the truth, Ned," begged his father. "Quickly, before you die. It's the least you can do, now."

"Nate . . . it was Nate's idea. He was one of the old Lacy gang. He and Mose. He made me . . . steal that letter from your safe. We read it . . . this morning. It told everything. I don't know how Clarence knew . . . but it was Clarence that killed Mose last night. The letter said . . . that Mose was . . . the only one in the gang that knew . . . Lacy . . . by

. . . sight. Scarred . . . face . . . name Jeff . . . Caudry . . ."

The lad's voice faded as life ebbed from his body. His father lifted a white, strained face, but there was a lilt of pride in his voice as he said simply to Sheriff Petrillo:

"I'm glad Ned came through in the end. That ends a ten-state search for Jim Lacy, and it exonerates these Powder Valley men who have accomplished overnight what the lawmen of the Southwest have been unable to accomplish over a period of years."

Ezra surged backward, glaring fretfully at Sam with his one eye. "I dunno whether I like that or not," he whispered hoarsely. "What's exonerate, Sam? Is that good or bad?"

"I shore dunno," Sam confessed comfortably. "We'll put 'er up to Pat soon as he can set up an' take notice . . . an' if it's the kinda cussword I suspicion it is we'll make Mr. Tom Leroy take 'er back an' wash his mouth out with soap to boot."

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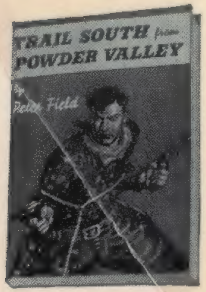

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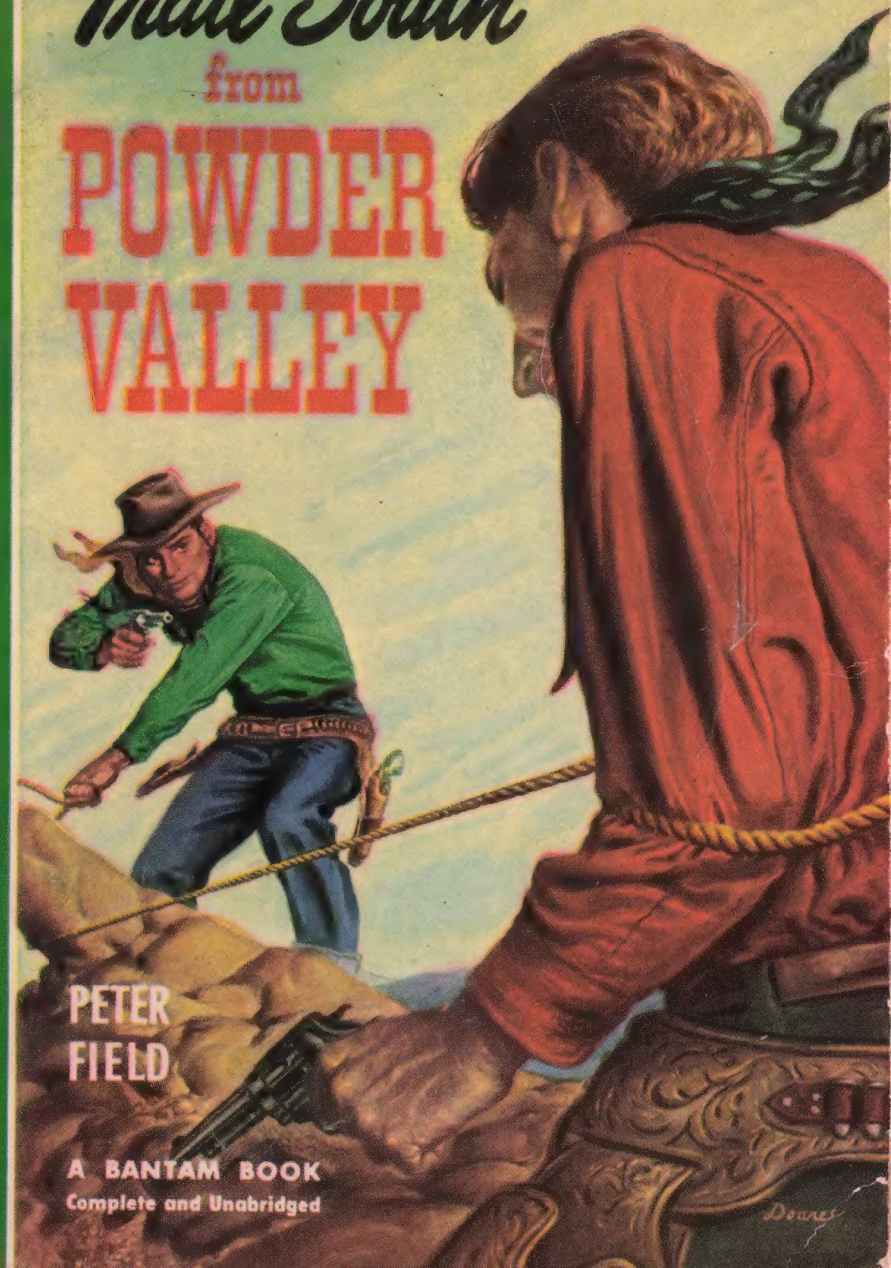

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